Mark Gonnerman: Good evening and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and we’re so pleased that you’ve taken time this evening, on the day we recognize our military veterans—actually, this entire week is Veterans Awareness Week—to join us for the first of five conversations under the rubric of *Iraq: Reframe*. The Aurora Forum is co-presenting these conversations with the Montalvo Arts Center, located just 30 minutes south of us in Saratoga.

Tonight, Marjorie Miller, the foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, will interview Anthony Shadid, a *Washington Post* reporter and winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting for his work in Iraq. He is also the author of *Night Draws Near: Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War*, a riveting account of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq that leaves in one’s mind “a collage of chaotic images, disturbing in their brutality, grotesque in their repetition.” These are words used in the new afterword to this book. That, I think, sums up the reality of all war: chaotic, brutal, and grotesque in its repetition. Who can read *Night Draws Near* and not feel motivated to do whatever one can do to put an end to such madness? While reading Anthony’s book, a line from T.S. Eliot’s poem “Gerontion” kept coming to mind: “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”

*Iraq: Reframe* is an innovative constellation of art exhibitions, performances, and events like this that bring attention to cultural and humanitarian crises stemming from the Iraq war. The *Iraq: Reframe* project: the imperative in the title bespeaks a sense of urgency. *Iraq: Reframe*—rethink, reconsider—marks a new direction for Montalvo under the leadership of Bob Sain, the art center’s new executive director. The project is curated by Rijin Sahakian, and it is my pleasure to work with her and others on staff at Montalvo to prepare and present this public conversation series. I would like Bob and Rijin to stand up and be recognized. [Applause]

*Iraq: Reframe* is made possible by the contributions of Montalvo members and volunteers with foundation support provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Information about Montalvo and other *Iraq: Reframe* events is available on tables in the lobby and on both the
Aurora Forum and Montalvo Web sites. The Aurora Forum is co-sponsored by Stanford’s Office of Public Affairs and Stanford Continuing Studies.

Tonight’s program is being recorded for later broadcast by KQED Public Radio, and we will follow our usual program format of 45 minutes of onstage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience-inspired discussion. If you have a question or comment to contribute when we get to that portion of the evening, please line up behind one of the two microphones in the aisles and await your turn to speak.

I’ll now turn the Forum over to veteran foreign correspondent and editor Marjorie Miller of the Los Angeles Times, but before doing that, I ask that you please read Anthony Shadid’s book, share what you learn tonight with your friends and neighbors, and help close the information gap about Iraqi peoples, their arts, cultures, suffering, and resilience in the face of tragedy and terror.

Please join me in welcoming Marjorie Miller and Anthony Shadid to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

Marjorie Miller: Thank you very much. Thank you for coming, thank you for spending an evening talking and thinking about Iraq. Anthony and I first met about five years ago when I tried and failed to hire him. Instead he went to The Washington Post. But since then, we both—each in our own way—have spent the entire time thinking about Iraq, working on Iraq, living in Iraq, and trying to tell the story of Iraq. I thought that since this forum, which is put together by the Montalvo Center and the Aurora Forum, is about different ways of telling the story of Iraq, we should talk about how we have written the first draft of this story.

Let’s go back to 2003 to start with and try to remember the story that we thought we were going to tell when we went in there. What did you think you were going to write?

Anthony Shadid: You know, it’s funny that you mention that because I remember vividly having a conversation with a friend of yours, Phil Bennett, now the managing editor at The Washington Post. I was sitting in Doha in the Persian Gulf waiting on my visa to get into Baghdad, and we were also kind of projecting what was down the road—what was going to follow the invasion. And I remember very vividly this conversation with Phil Bennett that the invasion would happen, it would not last that long, and I would probably be moving to Beirut within six weeks or maybe a couple of months, and start working as the Middle East correspondent for the Washington Post. It just kind of gives you a sense of how uninformed … we were not uninformed, necessarily … but how we had not been able to conceive it in the right way. And then I’ll ask you the question: How long did you all project it as you were planning?

Miller: Well, like Phil at The Washington Post and The New York Times, we thought we were mobilizing for a set period, maybe six weeks. And so we all threw all of these resources at the war and after about four weeks when it wasn’t over and it wasn’t over, we were all looking around for a whole back bench of people to send in, and we’ve been
looking for that back bench every year since. When you went in, you thought you were covering a fixed war to oust Saddam Hussein. What were the fears that people in Iraq were expressing to you at that time?

**Shadid:** That first week, you know, the journalism … To be completely honest, I wasn’t all that proud of the reporting or writing that I did in that week before the war, but I do remember pretty vividly how sophisticated the people who lived in Baghdad … how sophisticated their read of the situation was. This was before the invasion actually started—before the bombing began. I remember one almost anecdotal story was how there was a run on gun stores. People were arming themselves. My first impression as a reporter was that they were arming themselves to fight the Americans, or what have you. In fact, what they were doing was trying to prepare themselves for the looting that they feared would follow the fall of the government or the fall of Saddam, and that was exactly what happened. It was a very uncanny read of the landscape there in Baghdad. There was the fear of anarchy, the fear of strife, the fear of sectarian strife. All these things, I think, were talked about before the invasion. It was just up to us as reporters to try to understand them, try to put them together, and try to get a reading of the place before, and I don’t think we did that all that successfully, to be honest.

**Miller:** I remember I went in about two or three weeks before the war to try to get more reporters into the country, and I distinctly remember people saying—even people who would sort of admit that they didn’t like Saddam very much (and there weren’t very many people who felt comfortable doing that)—saying still they didn’t want to see the Americans come because they feared it would lead to a breakup of the country and they wanted a strong Iraq. Did you hear that?

**Shadid:** Definitely. I think that was always one of the things that was maybe underappreciated, in a sense. It was the sense of nationalism, it was the sense of pride, it was, of course, the sense of dignity you find in so many Arab countries. I think we as reporters (and this is something that took me a little while to get used to because it was a dictatorship and it was very difficult—the circumstances themselves were very difficult) … you wondered what to listen to. You wondered what to hear before the invasion actually began. Do you trust what you’re hearing? Do you believe what you’re hearing? And I think navigating that …. Are people too scared to tell you exactly what they’re feeling or what they’re sensing? And time and again, I think that I’ve learned this as a reporter not only in Iraq but in other places, is that often what you hear is exactly what you should write. Don’t try to read too much into what you’re hearing. You’ve got to always be skeptical, you’ve got to be critical, but often people will say more than you expect them to say in some ways. And I think that there was a diversity of opinion even before the invasion that I don’t think I appreciated as a reporter. But looking back, and looking back at my notebooks when I was writing *Night Draws Near*, I realized people were saying a lot to me and I just…. I didn’t give them the credit for speaking out, I think, in some ways.
Miller: Unlike most of the correspondents who were there at the time, and even now, you speak Arabic. Do you think that you were able to get more out of them because you spoke Arabic?

Shadid: That’s something that I’ve wondered about. I think it definitely helped almost in a sense of logistics during the invasion itself in that I could get out on my own and do work. I wouldn’t have to find a translator and take him with me. And that was key. What we had back then was a “minder,” basically an escort from the Information Ministry, whose job was to keep an eye on everything you did. My minder became a friend and in time collaborated with us. That may not be the best choice of words, but he worked with me during the invasion and let me kind of do things that I wasn’t supposed to be doing at that time. Having Arabic was instrumental in that you could actually get out and do work. I’ve always found the key to language, in a way, is that it’s the background noise. It’s the texture; it’s the stuff that makes a story a little bit richer. It’s the phrase or the choice of a word, the inflection, the proverb, which is always very important in Arabic. And I found that it’s not as much maybe that I’m going to get something that somebody else didn’t have, but I think it’s adding the texture to the story itself. And sometimes what makes or breaks the story is that texture.

Miller: I was struck at the time by the fact that more than half the country had been born under Saddam and never knew any form of government or life outside of that regime. I wondered what they envisioned post-Saddam. Did they talk about that before the invasion other than to fear the breakup of the country?

Shadid: I think I may have gotten this wrong. This is the kind of thing … I question a lot of what I was hearing and what I was believing. I’ve kind of gone back and forth over how much sense to make of what was being said at the time. But I think fear, in some ways, was the overwhelming sentiment that I got. Maybe it was my own fear that I was reading into the story; who knows. But it did seem like there was a real distinct sense of fear. I think other people—and there were a few people I met during the invasion who were hopeful. There’s no question there was optimism among some quarters there that if the Americans could prosecute a war like this in three weeks, God knows what they can do to the country afterwards. In fact, one of my favorite people that I met there … his sentiments changed very distinctly as time wore on and as months passed … but I’ll never forget walking into his house (and this was five days before the war ended) and he was sitting in the dark drinking a warm Coca-Cola (his refrigerator wasn’t working; he had no ice) and he was excited and so optimistic. He was like: It’s almost over and a new life can begin and I’ll mark my birthday from that day. There was, among some quarters, a real sense of optimism. And I think, in some ways, he was the most tragic person I wrote about in Night Draws Near because he was almost completely disillusioned a year later. It was very tragic. Did you see that as an editor? Did you see those sentiments?

Miller: I guess there was definitely a lot of fear that I witnessed on the ground and then in the stories coming back, and most of it was fear of the unknown. I think they had a hard time imagining what was coming or what could possibly come or any good outcome. It turns out they might not have been wrong.
Shadid: I think that quality of the unknown is exactly right. I think it’s one of the more intimidating sentiments—the complete unknown. And that’s what it was at that time in so many ways. Everything was up for grabs.

Miller: We were all asking the same question: What happens afterwards? There must be a plan. Remember? There must be a plan.

Shadid: I remember Jay Garner. We were sitting at the Hamra Hotel at that point (we were still next door to it—the Washington Post bureau). I don’t think he’s a bad person; I think he was well intentioned. But Jay Garner was the person put in charge of whatever you’d call the occupation after the fall of Saddam. He was the first person who preceded Paul Bremer. And I’ll never forget that. The city was literally burning at that point and the looting was going on unchecked, and it was a sad scene, in a way. Jay Garner came and joined us for dinner and all he could talk about were the ruins he had seen in Hilla, south of Baghdad, and that was dominating his impression of Iraq at that time. And you felt that the city was burning around you, in a way. I don’t want to overstate it, but it was a very dramatic scene. You got the sense then, I think, that maybe there isn’t a plan; maybe they really don’t have any idea what they’re doing.

Miller: Let’s go back to April 9, 2003. The tanks are coming in, the statue comes down, you’re finally able to really get out without a minder, if you want to, and without fear of the government. What were you seeing and hearing on the streets on that day?

Shadid: To this day, that remains …. When I think about my time in Iraq, I think that’s the memory that’s most distinct to me: that day of April 9. Because like you said, first I remember waking up and there was fear. The looting had started, we feared that God knows what was going to happen to the hotel and to the people in the hotel. So we kind of hunkered down for the first few hours that morning. Then nothing happened so we ventured out. And I went alone at that time. My driver stayed home.

Miller: Didn’t a lot of the Information Ministry people just disappear?

Shadid: Immediately. Everything vanished. It felt incredibly precarious. And then I remember going out to the street and, again, nobody really knew exactly what was going to happen. There was all this talk. People were asking me, “Can we still use money?” “What are the Americans going to do with this?” “What are they going to do with that?” All these questions of what was next. Life literally had been upended. And then I remember there was a shout that kind of rang out across the street that the Americans had arrived, and I walked out to the main street and this column of tanks was rolling down toward Firdos Square, and rightly or wrongly, it was the iconic image of what followed when the statue was pulled down. And I think what was so remarkable to me about that scene that day was how much it shadowed what was going to follow, in a lot of ways. I’d almost break it down…. This is not a very accurate breakdown of what people were saying, but I remember very distinctly that some people were very offended that the Americans had arrived in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. Some people were jubilant
because Saddam had fallen, and then there was maybe an equal number or maybe a few more were just saying, Let’s wait and see. What are their intentions? And I remember, over and over, What are their intentions? This question of what are they here to really do? I remember after this conversation just standing there in that street, and I wrote about this in Night Draws Near because it was such a strange moment. I felt just kind of overwhelmed by what was going on around me. As a journalist, I was glad I wasn’t going to die in this war. Nobody knew what was going to happen. As an Arab-American, I found this very sad, in a way. I couldn’t care less about Saddam being overthrown, but here was Baghdad. This is a city … it’s not Doha, it’s not Riyadh, it’s not Dubai … this is one of the truly great historic cities of the Arab world, of Islamic culture, and it had been conquered. And I felt a sense of sadness about that at a very deep level. And I remember as an American I felt that we had no idea about what we were about to get into, and I was overwhelmed by that sense of that right then: that these tanks had arrived in this square and they had inherited this country—a country that had been brutalized by eight years of war with Iran, a decade of sanctions, Saddam’s rule—and they had inherited it. It was theirs now, and I didn’t know quite then that they didn’t know what to do with it, but that was my fear, I think, a little bit.

Miller: I’m reading an interesting book right now, Reporting Iraq, that’s put out by the Columbia Journalism Review. It’s interviews with about 46 journalists of all sorts—photographers, television, radio—who have covered it from 2003 to 2006, and many talk about that day and about the ambiguity that was so apparent that day. And Larry Kaplow of Cox Newspapers was standing next to a doctor, I think it was, who saw the tanks coming in with little American flags on the antennae and said, “You should go tell them to take those flags off.” And he said, “Why? Do they make you angry?” And he said, “Because those are American flags on American tanks, and this is an occupation.” And I don’t think that most of the journalists believed, necessarily, right on that day that it was an occupation that would endure. I think from where I was sitting we still thought that it would be short-lived.

Shadid: I think that’s so true. This is one of the reasons … I mean, it wasn’t the reason to write Night Draws Near, by any means, but I remember being thankful that I had the chance to rewrite that story that I wrote on April 9 in the book Night Draws Near, because I think I got it wrong. Just like you said, I think I was … intimidated is not the right word, but I think I tried to fit the story a little bit too much into this narrative of Saddam having fallen, the war being over, and it was wrong in a lot of respects. And I kind of appreciated the fact that I got to go back and rewrite it in Night Draws Near and try to get it a little bit more right.

Miller: How much do you think that we were swallowing was, for lack of a better word, government propaganda or the way it was supposed to be, and how much was due to the fact that a lot of these reporters had been in Afghanistan and had seen the troops greeted with cheers and the Taliban flee and at least in the short term what looked like a much better and brighter future?
Shadid: That’s interesting. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but that actually makes a lot of sense to me. I think it was the easier narrative, in a way, and it was the safer narrative. Let’s be honest: we’re not going to get criticism if we kind of fit into that narrative. Maybe it’s not the right one, but no one is going to criticize you for writing that. And to me, that was the tough thing: you’re not talking to enough people that make a bolder claim or a bolder statement. We heard that ambiguity, like Larry’s talking about—that ambiguity on that street that day—but is this somehow reflective? Can we really go with this? Can we hang a story on it? And that was the problem I faced, and I think I got it a little bit wrong that day. I mean, looking back on that coverage over those days, do you think there was enough sense of the…

Miller: Well, I don’t know. You know, Colin Powell warned us: You break it, you own it. And yet Anne Garrels of NPR talks about that moment when an Iraqi said to her almost the same thing: It’s yours now. You’re going to have to run it and we’re going to hate you every day for it. And I think she was quite shocked at that moment. But I don’t know; maybe we didn’t want to believe it. Maybe we didn’t think we wanted to spend the next five years doing this, and we all feared or suspected how bloody it could be, so no one wanted that genie out of the bottle.

Shadid: That’s exactly right.

Miller: How much of the fear of criticism do you think was part of the post-September 11 mood? I mean, there was a whole period where there was not a lot of public criticism of anything that the government was doing on the part of the media, on the part of the Congress, on the part of the public. It was truly locked down: You’re with us or you’re against us. How much did that affect the storytelling in the beginning?

Shadid: I think that’s a good question and I’m not sure how I’d answer it. Just as one reporter in Baghdad during the invasion and even after the invasion, even during the occupation, what I kind of wrestled with was, I think, the stigma that was basically the stigma of the American psyche about the Arab world, about Muslims, about Arabs, about a certain dehumanization that I think precedes any kind of conflict, that precedes any kind of war. You know, we talked about this earlier. It’s this idea of …. The question I was asking myself was, How am I going to portray Iraqis, for instance. I hate to even … it’s a shame that I even have to ask this question, but I did ask myself that during the beginning of the invasion: How am I going to portray Iraqis to a readership that I think has been indelibly shaped by the events of September 11? If I wrote about Iraqis, I think it’s sad to say this, but I thought that if I wrote about Iraqis, people would not connect … that they wouldn’t understand the people that I was writing about. And what I tried to do—and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t—but it was to shear them of their nationality and their ethnicity, in a way, and portray them in the most viscerally human terms possible to try to appeal to this sense of universal emotions or that we would identify with a mother sending her son off to fight or we would identify with a father losing his daughter in a bombing. I thought religion was that one thing that did connect both cultures, in a way … that was somewhat shared. And I didn’t feel that I had to work around that. That, in a way, I thought would make sense to people in a kind of a
powerful way. But the other thing I wrestled with was, How do you write about conflict at a certain level? For the first two days, it was just writing about the bombing and you’d run out of adjectives to describe the bombing and it was kind of haphazard. I was talking to Phil Bennett, the foreign editor at the time, and it kind of fell into this idea of using war as a backdrop to very human stories.

**Miller:** I think also a lot of us tried to focus on middle-class Iraqis that people could identify with: university students and architects and doctors and lawyers and people who lived like we live so that you could try to make people in this country identify with what it would be like to have troops come down your street.

**Shadid:** I think that’s a great point. This is one thing I’ve asked myself sometimes in covering Iraq, for instance. I think we often do, as reporters, go into somebody’s shop or are invited into someone’s house, and sometimes I think that skews the reporting in a certain direction so that we don’t appreciate what a lot of people in Sadr City were thinking of, for instance. I think we were taken by surprise a little bit by how vociferous sometimes the criticism and anger towards the Americans was. And I thought just the class of our subjects sometimes … I think it’s a small part of the bigger picture, but sometimes it did steer the reporting in a certain direction.

**Miller:** Right. Then that gets to the whole issue of access. One thing that struck me is that while the people of Iraq did not necessarily feel liberated on April 9, the journalists did. Suddenly you were free to leave the hotel and suddenly you could go out, unrestricted, and talk to people and try to get the stories that you could never get before. What was that like for you?

**Shadid:** That was in some ways the most remarkable thing about 2003. And 2003—if we look at it today in 2007—it’s such a different landscape in so many ways. It’s been ten years or so in the Arab world, and you’re always having to negotiate information ministries and censorship and just the hassles of everyday reporting. People are often scared, even in a place like Egypt, which is authoritarian but does not have a serious style of authoritarianism. And all of a sudden after the government fell on April 9, it was the first time for me, at least the first time for me as a reporter, that I could try to make sense of an entire country. As long as you were dogged enough, determined enough, resolved enough to go after the story, you could usually get it done. I thought that was remarkable in some ways. And I do think that our coverage—the LA Times, the Post, the New York Times—I think in our coverage after the fall of the government there was a certain redemption there because I think we were critical about it. I think we did foresee some of the trends and the changes and the shifts in what was going on before they were generally accepted. You all made an issue of that—of identifying insurgency, of identifying civil war.

**Miller:** Yeah. I think that we very quickly figured out that there was an insurgency. At first, there wasn’t. At first, from here, it looked like it was impossible for you to move around from the beginning. There was looting and chaos and crime and the images that
we saw sitting here were of a lot of violence or what we considered violence at the time, but it wasn’t directed at you and you could move pretty freely around Baghdad, right?

Shadid: Definitely. I remember that first day after: April 10. There was looting of the house of the man they called Chemical Ali. I remember just sitting there with people. Everything was taken out very methodically. It was just kind of a peaceful experience. There was really no threat at all. Even through that … I think even going back to Fallujah … every day for a week, for instance, I didn’t feel I was in physical danger in those first few months, by any means. Maybe that was naïveté.

Miller: And people wanted to tell their stories at that point.

Shadid: I think that’s the one thing that journalism does really well: they can bear witness, in a way. And it doesn’t always work, but when it does work, I think it is a worthwhile pursuit of journalism. And there was so much of that going on. I think what surprised me in a way was that I expected people to be much more scared or anxious. There wasn’t a lot of that. It struck me just so soon after the fall of the government how easy it was to talk to people and how much people would say and how open the place was, in some ways. It’s changed quickly, I think.

Miller: How quickly did people go out and try to find their relatives who were jailed or lost or had disappeared, and where did they go to look for them?

Shadid: It seemed to me that it was almost immediate. I think that it was so turbulent. Those first few weeks were almost a blur when I think back to them. That was going on: this idea of kind of reclaiming the past, in a way. There was this idea of what was going on in Najaf, for instance; what was happening in Sadr City as the clerics kind of established power. I was just looking back at a story from April 15 about the clerics taking charge of Sadr City and it was just uncanny. It was incredible to me how much that bore out over the years that followed.

Miller: Were you able to go to the mosques and talk to the clerics?

Shadid: It’s funny, I was thinking about this the other day. When I went down to Najaf about a week after the fall of the government—and it just shows how ignorant I was about the country I was trying to cover, but I remember going to Najaf, and for people who don’t know, Najaf is one of the holiest cities in Iraq, it’s where the Shia clergy would have their base; they would be most prominent there—I remember going into this town and asking, Who’s in charge here? I actually asked that question, and they told me, There are two guys here. There’s Ayatollah Sistani and there’s this other guy named Muqtada al-Sadr, and these are the two guys you should talk to. Sistani wouldn’t talk to me so I went to talk to Sadr, and he is probably the most relevant—perhaps the most important—person in Iraq today.

Miller: Yeah, that doesn’t happen anymore.
That reminds me of a story. Patrick McDonnell, who was one of our correspondents there, talks about an experience, again in the early days, of going up to a little town in Fallujah and asking to see the leadership. He was using this as an example of how little he understood about Iraq. He goes to the leader and he says, “Well, how long have you been in office?” (He says he’s thinking of term limits, you know.) He said that the sheik or whoever it was said, “My grandfather’s grandfather….”

How long was it before you started to realize that this wasn’t just looting and chaos but that there was an organized and violent opposition?

Shadid: I think we asked those questions pretty early. We were hearing things about the rocket-propelled grenades; there were these sporadic attacks on U.S. troops in Baghdad. I remember asking that question to the Pentagon correspondent who was there with me. I said, “When do we call it an insurgency?” And this was just a few weeks after the government fell. This guy, Tom Ricks, our Pentagon correspondent, suggested doing a story that I thought was really … I thought it kind of foreshadowed a little bit of what was going to follow. He went with American troops as they were patrolling a neighborhood in Baghdad, and I followed about 100 meters behind and talked to people in the neighborhood after the American troops had passed. And I think that was to me a real wake-up call. That was really revealing to me of people’s sentiments. Now, granted, this was a neighborhood where there were some former military officers (I think it was predominantly Sunni, although I think it mattered less back then, to be honest). So, the thing is, it might be skewed in a certain direction, but I think it was revealing how adamant people were about the presence of Americans in Baghdad and about what it represented; that it was an occupation. I think that was really eye-opening at the time.

We kind of go back to what Larry was talking about with the American flags on these vehicles on the day the government fell. I don’t think we as Americans understood the power of the word ihtilal, occupation. In Arabic, it conjures up a very distinct image and that’s the image that’s very intimately linked to Israel and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. When you used that word in Arabic, that’s what it meant, and when the Americans used that word in Iraq, that’s what it meant in a lot of ways, where I think as Americans we might think of Germany or Japan in World War II. Once you introduced that word—I’m overstating my case here—but I almost thought it was hopeless at that point. And I’m not sure…. You know, you didn’t get the sense from the CPA [Coalition Provisional Authority] or Bremer’s people at the time that they really understood what they were doing. There was a great guy there named Hugh Moran who spoke Arabic and was a veteran diplomat in the Middle East, and he got the very difficult task of going to a meeting of tribal leaders and telling them why they should be occupied. And I remember him recounting this story, and it was hopeless. The minute he said it’s an occupation, he got shouted down; they wouldn’t let him speak. This was really early on. This was May, I think, when it happened.

Miller: I was in Central American with Phil Bennett, and in those days we used to get in our Jeep and drive out to the mountains and go look for the insurgents and interview them and get the other side of the story. Were you ever able to do that in Iraq in the beginning … go look for the insurgents?
**Shadid:** That was, I think, one of the more frustrating things because you knew something was happening and you wanted to get your head around it; you wanted to understand it and try to grasp it. To be honest, back then my biggest fear was that people would sell themselves as insurgents when they actually weren’t and that you’d be duped and embarrass yourself. I don’t think the danger of doing that was as clear at that point. So what I ended up doing was interviews on people who had been killed fighting the Americans and I tried to reconstruct their lives and their motivations and what they hoped to get out of this. I often found that very revealing. It wasn’t perfect; it wasn’t a good way to do it, but I think it was probably the best I could have done at that point. But I think you bring up a good point: Have we ever understood the insurgency as journalists? What would you think?

**Miller:** I think it’s been extremely difficult because we can’t go talk to them; we can’t interview them. At a certain point, the insurgents turned on us. I was going to ask you when you felt that point was. Not just a date, but when did you on the ground come to realize that the insurgents didn’t see a difference between you as an American and an American soldier and American policy.

**Shadid:** I think the day that I actually go back to is in April 2004 when it was the first battle in Fallujah and then Muqtada al-Sadr’s people … there was an uprising in Baghdad and in some of the cities in the south. That to me just felt like almost a seismic shift in events in Iraq in April 2004. But really when I thought that I wasn’t going to be able to report the story that I wanted to report was about six months before that when I was in a mosque in Fallujah and there was so much anger, they were so upset, there was so much resentment that I had to leave there. And I think that was the first time I felt endangered, and that was six months before. And it didn’t matter that you were a journalist anymore. I think this is something we’re seeing across the Middle East and across the Arab world is that the idea of a journalist being a noncombatant is just not the case anymore. There are some exceptions. Covering the war last summer in Lebanon, Hezbollah did not threaten us physically. They let us do our jobs as noncombatants, but I think that’s an exception rather than the rule anymore.

**Miller:** Do you think that’s a permanent change?

**Shadid:** In the Middle East, I wonder. You know, I feel as though there’s so much…. I’m very discouraged. *Hopeless* is too strong a word, but I’m very fearful about what’s ahead in the Middle East because I think there is such a degree of radicalization and I think the resentment is so deep at this point. I think there are some places in Lebanon, for instance, where I live right now where it’s going to be too unsafe for an American to go there in five years, whatever the occupation. I do think it’s going to get worse. I also don’t think we’ve seen the full reverberations of the Iraq conflict. It’s hard to say, but it looks pretty grim.
Miller: How do you get around that if you can’t report the other side in the traditional sense that we’re used to? How do you go get the other side of the story? How do you come to understand the insurgents?

Shadid: I think that’s a great question. I’m not sure you can at this point. The journalism that I thought made the most sense when I was in Iraq was the journalism that I could do over time. This is kind of a little bit of a tangent, but I think as journalists we often do the interview and we’re done. And what I tried to do with the people I met during the invasion was to stick with them over a year and keep going back to them, month after month. That was the journalism that I felt I learned the most about the country that way and how sentiments were changing and how opinions were shifting and that in some ways survived the test of time—journalism over time, in a way—that long view of events. But that’s one piece of the bigger portrait. I guess I’d ask you the question: Compared to Central America in the 1980s as a journalist, how much better was that understood than Iraq is today, do you think?

Miller: I think the story was a lot simpler. It was pretty much a cold war story of east versus west. And I think part of why we’ve struggled in Iraq is that not only do you have the job of trying to decipher whether what the government is saying is true or not, but you have the job in the middle of all that of understanding so many factions. I mean, which insurgency are we trying to understand? We were constantly—we are still constantly—trying to figure out what is the indigenous Iraqi Sunni insurgency? What part of it was Bathists? What part wasn’t but is opposed to the Americans now? What part is foreign fighters allied or not allied with al Qaeda? What is the relationship now between the Sunni sheiks who apparently were with the insurgency and now are apparently with the U.S. government? It’s just so much more complicated. And I think in Central America most of the press corps spoke the language, and the culture is much closer to our culture, especially if you grew up in California or spent any time in Latin America at all. So you wouldn’t go in and ask the equivalent of “How long have you been in power?” because you would know the culture better.

Shadid: And I think it is really…. It sounds bleak, but I do think we’re dealing in some respects with two cultures that don’t share the same space right now, and I feel that pretty powerfully.

Miller: I think that we really don’t understand tribal cultures at all. And I’ve often said that journalists are the worst people to cover this because we’re the people—we’re the ex-pats—who have left our country, left our families, left our religions. We live in this sort of outer space that isn’t occupied by anybody but ex-pats and journalists, so we go into these cultures and try to delve into societies that are terribly wedded to their history, to their land, to their religion, and I think it’s a very hard thing for us to penetrate.

Shadid: I agree with that. Well, you know, talking about cultures and our understanding of cultures, this to me is something that is one of the great legacies of the conflict in Iraq, in a way. I always think of this idea of unintended consequences, and I think there was this American sense of Iraqi culture before the invasion—that it was a country of Shiites,
Sunnis, and Kurds. Kurds and Arabs and Sunnis and Shiites, and this was basically how we were going to understand it. It was one element of what Iraq was. It was so much more complex, so much more nuanced, so much more ambiguous in so many ways. And the Communist Party would appeal of course across sectarian borders. In fact, party rank and file was predominantly Shiite. But we had this notion that was so superficial, and then, you know, in part our policies impart the policies of exiled opposition. We proceeded to make it that. I think that is one of the great tragedies of Iraq today is that our very superficial understanding of the country is becoming more and more the reality of the country today, and I don’t know what you do to reverse that. I think this idea that things are age-old hatreds that are just coming to the surface—I don’t believe that. I think these things are manufactured in some ways, and very powerfully. The number of people in Baghdad who would have identified themselves by way of their sectarian affiliation before the invasion was miniscule. This wasn’t a resentment that came to the surface all of a sudden; it was one that was shaped, and it was shaped because there are no longer guarantees of survival.

**Miller:** Your mobility and the mobility of the press corps have been restricted. We’ve all relied more and more on what started as Iraqi translators who then became Iraqi reporters for us so that today we all have maybe two or three or four U.S. reporters on the ground, but we have dozens of Iraqi language and cultural translators for us. What do you think the impact on the reporting has been of handing over a lot of that information gathering to the Iraqis?

**Shadid:** I think you made a great point earlier that we would know nothing about Iraq today were it not for those people, and their efforts are heroic. One of my great colleagues who was with us from The Washington Post is in the audience today, Huda Ahmed. I remember that group coming together in those early days and it still, to a large degree, is the same group of people today in The Washington Post bureau. Is it better journalism or worse journalism? I just don’t know how we define it anymore. I think it’s the journalism that we can do at this point, and as you pointed out, were it not for them, we wouldn’t have a story.

**Miller:** Well, we certainly wouldn’t have the access. We wouldn’t be able to move around, and I think for most of us who don’t speak the language and don’t have any Arab culture in our background, we wouldn’t get it at all. I think we rely on them a lot to translate the language of politics, the language of religion, what’s going on on the ground.

**Shadid:** The difficulties we’re facing …. The Washington Post just lost one of our Iraqi colleagues recently, and the decision was made to send him to go cover something, and that decision in some ways was a disastrous one. I found that to be one of the difficult things as well. You’re making decisions about other people’s lives; you’re making decisions about your own life.

**Miller:** I think the Committee to Protect Journalists says, I think, that about 160 journalists and media workers have died in Iraq so far, and that’s more than in any other
war—Vietnam, World War I, World War II—and the vast majority of those are Iraqis. There’s a degree to which we’ve outsourced the coverage of the war that I don’t think we’ve been completely honest with ourselves about.

**Shadid:** I agree with that.

**Miller:** They’re doing it in part because it’s their country and they’ve become very committed journalists and it’s their story they want told and they want to get out, but we who are deciding often that it’s too dangerous and it’s marginally less dangerous for them to go into some neighborhoods, but it’s obviously not that much less dangerous.

**Shadid:** That’s exactly right.

**Miller:** One part of this that we haven’t talked about, and then I think we’ll probably have to open it to questions, is embedding. At the beginning of the war, we were all very nervous about embedding and embedded reporters because in Gulf War I, most of the embedded reporters had been corralled out in the desert and had not been allowed anywhere near the war, so we were all trying to decide how many reporters to send out embedded with the military and we all came to some compromise. But in the end, they turned out to be very valuable pieces of the mosaic. How different were the views of what was going on of your embedded colleagues and your views of what was going on, and how did those get used in the newspaper?

**Shadid:** That’s an interesting question. I remember that basically my colleagues and I at the time were getting what we called “feeds.” Basically, they would send in what they were reporting that day and you kind of read it to keep informed—to keep up to date. But you’re exactly right: it was a mosaic, in a way. There were these small pieces that you tried to fit together—you tried to make sense of. Actually, access is the cornerstone of reporting, and I thought the more access we had, the more aspects of the story, the better off we were. The danger now is that I think embedding is being abused at some level and it is one of the few avenues of access anymore, and that’s where the danger becomes. But I think back then in 2003 and during the invasion itself, it was actually a really worthwhile endeavor, as long as you had unembedded perspectives, and the *LA Times* did, and John Danishevsky was in Baghdad; we did, the *New York Times*. There were a lot of people in Baghdad at that point who could offer a different view—no more worthy, necessarily, but at least a different view. And I think that’s a danger that we’re facing now is just that we’re more and more limited in terms of what kind of access we can have.

**Miller:** I remember we got an awful lot of important stories out of those embeds that we wouldn’t have gotten. One of your colleagues, Bill Brannigan, got a story at a checkpoint of the killing of civilians. That was the first, I think, really close-up view that we had that we realized that Iraqi civilians were staring to get killed in big numbers. There were embedded reporters who told us about the supply shortages for the troops on the convoys going up into Baghdad. That was a story that we wouldn’t have gotten.
Shadid: To be honest, even today I think embeds are more dangerous … I think it’s the most dangerous assignment in Iraq even to this day.

Miller: The problem is, again, that our unilateral, as we called it, access to go out and report what you see with your own eyes and to conceive of the story yourself is really restricted, and I think that that makes it much harder because as much as we need and want our Iraqi translators, it’s still coming through their filter, and they don’t know the other side of it. They don’t know our audience, they don’t know our experiences always, so they don’t know how to frame what they’re seeing often for the people we’re writing for.

Shadid: How do you deal with that as an editor?

Miller: Well, again, we do what we did in the beginning: we have a lot of voices. One thing we started doing a lot that newspapers didn’t do before is we let many of our Iraqis write first-person stories because we can’t go out and get those stories sometimes ourselves and because it’s a completely legitimate voice, so we use a lot more first-person pieces than we ever did before in traditional newspapers. Most of our translators, like yours, I think, were not journalists. One was a pharmacist, one was a plastic surgeon, one was an architect, an engineer, a law professor; they’re highly educated, intelligent people, but not journalists. And they’ve learned how to become journalists, but we have to take that information and shape it for an American audience and shape it to answer the questions we’re trying to ask. Every once in a while, we have a stringer maybe in Fallujah or Ramadi who is a little bit anti-American and, as I think I was telling you before, there’s one stringer who, every time he filed a report, our reporter would say, “Be careful, there’s always a soldier killing a puppy in there.” You do have to be a little bit careful. Maybe there always was a soldier killing a puppy. I don’t know. It’s possible. How well do you think we’ve told the story?

Shadid: Did we tell it as well as we could have? I don’t know. It’s hard to answer. But I do think when people look back a generation from now, how will we be judged on covering the story? I don’t know the answer to that. Maybe there isn’t an answer right now.

Miller: Do you think that there are big pieces of the story that you want to tell that you can’t get out and tell right now?

Shadid: I have been gone for a year. I used to always say that the longer I was in Iraq, the less I understood it. It kind of sounds like a joke, but I actually meant it because I think I appreciated the complexity of it. And to have been gone now for a year, I feel in some ways very removed from the story.

Miller: You know how you get to a place and you do one interview and you think, I’ve got it; let’s go. And then you interview a second person and you say, Oh no, it’s not as clear as it seemed. And then the third and the fourth, and this place just keeps getting foggier and foggier.
Shadid: That’s true.

Miller: The other story that I think people will look back at and ask how well we told it was the torture at Abu Ghraib. Were you hearing rumors before? The photos that will live on are not any photos that a journalist took, but the photos that the soldiers took themselves at Abu Ghraib.

Shadid: I’ll never forget. It’s a lesson even as young reporter: don’t dismiss things you hear. Always say, Maybe it’s true, maybe it’s true. Again, as a correspondent in Cairo and later in other places, that is one of my big regrets. I remember months before Abu Ghraib broke, hearing—I think I was near Khaldiya or Ramadi—one of the villages in Anbar, and several people were coming up to me. They had come out of the prison and they told me these unbelievable things the Americans were doing to them. And I’ll admit it: I didn’t believe it, and I really regret that. This was several months before the scandal actually broke and I hadn’t learned the lesson yet that there was probably something to it. People were talking about it.

Miller: Why do you think you didn’t believe it?

Shadid: The stories they told me were exactly right—that we later learned when we saw the pictures as to what happened there. You know, I think that’s where being an American got in the way of being a journalist, and I regret that. It may sound odd, but usually I take pride in being a journalist before I’m an American, and I think in that instance it was the reverse and it got me in trouble.

Miller: Well, a lot of that was beyond the imagination.

Shadid: Exactly.

Miller: It was, Why would they do that? So it certainly didn’t seem to make sense, and we’re always in the position of, as you said before, when people claimed to be insurgents, your detectors say, Well, how do I prove that they are insurgents? How do I know these aren’t claims? How do I know they’re not just bragging? And the reverse is, How do I prove that they were tortured? How do I know they’re not just anti-American? How do I know this isn’t disinformation? It’s the same thing that we would ask about the government when they claim that they’re killing insurgents or that this isn’t really Sunni Iraqis; these are al Qaeda foreigners. How to we prove that?

Shadid: To my knowledge, there’s only one reporter who actually pursued those stories that people were interested in: Charlie Hanley for the AP, who actually did write a story before the pictures were released of Abu Ghraib, but he was the only one at the time. In some ways, it was like the best of what the Associated Press can do is just report it out—really kind of ground-level reporting.
Miller: Well, it’s not unlike what we’re trying to find out today. The military says that explosives are coming in from Iran. How do we prove it? Show me something that proves we think it may be true. Whether or not it’s coming from the Iranian government or the black market, it’s highly likely it’s true, but show it to me. By the same token, how do we prove there aren’t weapons of mass destruction? That’s one we didn’t do very well.

Well, I think we’re supposed to open this to questions about now. We could probably go on. I do have one more. If you have questions, you can line up at the microphones, and while you’re doing that, I’ll just ask you one more about what would you say … I’m sure you are asked more than once … why you don’t report the good news.

Shadid: I never understood that question, to be honest. I always felt that was what the reporters of Pravda did: they reported the good news. But I didn’t really understand that choice between good news and bad news. To me, you were trying to understand the story and the forces that were shaping the story, and the forces that were shaping the story in 2003 were big forces and they were forces that were going to have a lot of impact. They were going to forever shape the country. So it didn’t really make sense to me, to be honest. I could go out and write a story about a school being reopened, but what did that really say about the shape that Iraq was taking … the country that it was becoming? It’s all frivolous in a way to me, in some respects, and I think it did turn out to be frivolous, to be completely honest.

Question from the Audience: Based upon your touching the people in Baghdad and Anbar and other areas, what do you find is their sense about the state of the current government? To us, it seems a little bit paralyzed without moving toward solutions. Do they see alternate solutions, and that’s what the problem is? What’s your sense of the current political state there in Iraq?

Shadid: You know, I’m always reluctant to speak with too much authority about … Marjorie, I think, probably has a better sense of it than I do given that I haven’t been there since last year, since October. My own sense when I was there was that, you know, I think this American emphasis on the Iraqi government is always kind of misguided. I think it’s a bit player, in a way, to the bigger drama that’s going on in Iraq. If I learned anything back in 2003, it was to keep your eye on the big forces. As soon as you lose track of the big forces, you’re going to lose track of the story. And I don’t think the government is one of the big forces at this point. The forces that come to mind for me are people like Muqtada al-Sadr and what’s going on with the army of people of Anbar, where the Shiite militia is right now. These are the things that I think are shaping the country. I think the government is a distraction, in a way. It makes sense to us as Americans. We can get our hands around it and can understand it; the Iraqi government needs to step up. I not only think it’s wrongheaded; I think it’s in some ways really dangerous to think that that’s how we should understand what’s happening in the country at this point. You may have a different sense of it.
Miller: I just have a sense that they don’t really relate to the central government—that, again, it has become so atomized either on a neighborhood basis in Baghdad or on a regional basis that they relate to their region or to their local governments.

Question from the Audience: I was out of the country when the question of whether we were going to have the war was going on. I was actually in Australia. What we knew with all the people around the world, there were more than 11 million people who marched and said, We really don’t want a war; this time let’s handle Iraq differently. More than 55 percent of the population under 20 or under 19 years old was in favor of this idea. And what we kept getting back … and of course Australia is the ally of America at this point … but what we kept getting was that, Well, we’re really sorry, but America decided in the ’70s that this was the time we were going to go into Iraq because that’s when we would need the Middle Eastern oil and the Iraqi oil, and the plans had been drawn up in the ’70s and it really didn’t matter how many people were marching and saying they really wanted to deal with this differently. And that’s what the whole peace movement kept getting in Australia. It was a really strange thing. I’m just wondering, in terms of the reporting and the understanding, where that kind of knowledge is and what to do with it and how you see that.

Shadid: I remember talking to a woman before the invasion. She told me that God cursed Iraq by giving it oil. I always thought there was a lot of truth to that. It allowed it to become an important country in the 1970s; it also condemned it, I think, in certain respects to what it’s going through today. You know, the plans that are hatched, the policies that are under way—I don’t see them from my vantage point in the Middle East, Lebanon, and Iraq at this point, but Iraq is cursed, I think, by that oil in a way and I think the region itself is always going to have an incredible amount of American attention—America being the most powerful country in the world—placed on it. For good or for bad, and I think it’s been for a lot of bad lately, to be honest. We’ll see where it goes from here.

Question from the Audience: You said that before the invasion there wasn’t as much of a sectarian divide, and now there is. I am curious about what you think was the catalyst for that and what we could have done differently to prevent that from happening.

Shadid: It kind of goes back to that point that I was mentioning earlier—this misconception that we had of the country beforehand. And then we set in place policies, and I don’t want to say it was just the CPA that created this. I think this notion of guarantees of survival is very important and I think it does recast the way we think of identity. I think that is essential in some ways to what is going on in Iraq today. And there’s no question that the landscape has been completely redefined at this point. But I think there were policies in terms of creating the governing council—the percentages that were laid out there, the quotas that were put in the ministries—this notion that politics were going to revolve around this axis of sectarian ethnic identity—that that was the sole axis around which politics would revolve, in a way, and that was never the case in Iraqi history, I think, before the invasion. It became the case very soon after the fall of the government, and I think then exiled parties and other groups were able to exploit that
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notion of sectarian identity—that notion of the guarantees of survival—to use it for political gain. Some parties have done it very successfully. I think that set in motion this sequence of seismic events we’ve seen unfold today in Iraq that put the country where it is today. Like I said, I don’t want to blame it just on America, but I think American policy does share responsibility at some level for what’s unfolded in that sense. It was so frustrating to me as a reporter earlier this year being in Egypt, for instance. Egypt is a country that just can’t even really relate to…. It’s predominantly Sunnis. It’s a Christian population and it’s Sunni Muslim, but in medieval times it was ruled by a “Shiite” state, and its culture is shaped by that centuries-old history. So it’s a very ambiguous relationship to a notion of being Sunni or being Shiite. I remember sitting in Egypt and talking to people about this, and I think you could feel that there was a very concrete effort to fan Sunni insecurity in the Arab world as a way to blunt Iranian ambition in the region, and I think it was done in part as a policy—creating a kind of pro-U.S.-Arab axis that was going to blunt Iranian ambitions in the region. It was very much the direction in which we were going. So here’s a case of kind of fanning the sectarian tension for very short-term gains but not understanding the repercussions that might follow down the road. And I think we’re still seeing that right now at some level.

**Miller:** How do you explain the fact that on the one hand Sunnis are very nervous about the Shiite revival and the strength of Iran right now, and on the other hand Ahmadinejad is celebrated even throughout the Sunni world as the anti-American hero?

**Shadid:** Well, look at Hassan Nasrallah, who is even more powerful now.

**Miller:** That’s right. And Hezbollah.

**Shadid:** And I did feel things kind of shifted a little bit at the beginning of the year. You know, Nasrallah’s pictures were not all over Damascus the way they were soon after the war with Israel last summer. But I think it’s like we were talking about earlier, especially in the case of Iraq, the sentiments are often contradictory and you can celebrate Nasrallah standing up for Israel and for standing up to the Americans, and you can also fear what his ascent means for Iranian power in the region. To be honest, I still think the former is more pronounced than the latter. I think what we’re seeing in terms of this kind of stoking Sunni insecurity is state-driven, in a way. It’s driven by our allies in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. But it is there on the street level, and it’s there on the street level in a way that I think a lot of people want to resist but they’re forced to acknowledge it, and I think that’s the direction we’re headed. I think it could get deeper. I think it’s almost inevitably going to get deeper.

**Question from the Audience:** I appreciate you two going to Iraq and I think it’s very courageous of you to go and to write about it, but I’m really disturbed at some of the tone of what you’re saying. You appear to be, in a sense, “othering” the Iraqis in a way I find really disturbing—that this culture can’t be understood or it’s so complex it can’t be understood, and you couldn’t imagine that a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq would last more than a few weeks. I think that’s just incredible. And what I find amazing is how the people who organized this war could do this to Iraq—that they could destroy an
entire country, and we’re not wondering about how strange they are and how strange we are [Applause] that we don’t express any outrage or that we don’t try to stop these people who are doing this day after day after day? And I just … I guess when I’m listening to journalists speak, and I hear a lot of journalists speak, they seem to be living in a bubble that I don’t think the people in the Middle East are living in at all. They’re really facing extremely violent, horrifying reality, and they’re responding to it in a very complex way. And we’re the ones, it seems to me, who are strange because we’ve done this—we’ve allowed it to happen—and we haven’t resisted. And we sit around and talk in these comfortable environments as if the Middle East isn’t burning up. Can you comment on that? [Applause]

Shadid:  You know, I think it’s a fair criticism to make. I think we have to understand, as journalists, our relationship to the story. I think there’s no question about that. I disagree that we were somehow in a bubble in Iraq. And when I said that Iraqis don’t occupy the same space, I meant this: I meant there is such an accumulation of resentment and antagonism that has been built up in the Middle East over decades of U.S. policy, that is there, that lingers, that is in some ways building, that you are simply not going to interact these two cultures at the level that we might want to do, and we have to appreciate that fact. If we don’t appreciate that fact, we’re in for a lot more trouble about that. I’m not saying that I’m trying to exoticize it or make it otherworldly, by any means. I’m trying to appreciate the degree to which things have unfolded. And if we don’t appreciate that, we’re in for a lot more trouble. And I think it’s condescending to say the opposite: that they’re somehow like…. This is what the Americans did. They thought they had a tabula rasa and they were going to go in and export their own democracy and put it into this society that they didn’t appreciate, that they didn’t understand, that they didn’t understand the legacy of eight years of war and ten years of sanctions of Saddam’s rule. And this is what it got us. I mean, I think the cornerstone is to say that maybe we don’t understand exactly what’s going on, and we should acknowledge our ignorance. Maybe we should acknowledge our lack of understanding and try to figure it out and try to learn and try to appreciate it. I think that’s the best that we in journalism can do.

Question from the Audience:  I think that you mentioned briefly that you had an interview with Muqtada al-Sadr in 2003. I would like you to expand a little bit on what he said.

Shadid: That was an interesting interview, I’ll tell you. And again, going back to what I didn’t know—I didn’t know about him before. I’d heard about his father, but I didn’t understand the legacy of his father and how important his father’s movement as a popular movement was in Iraq before the invasion. My biggest impression, and it remains my impression today of Sadr, is this: he himself is not a very dynamic figure. He’s not a very impressive figure in a lot of respects. But I noticed it back then, and I think it’s still the case today, he has some very remarkable men around him—very dynamic figures who understand the politics of the street. They understand what makes a street movement. And I think since then until now, Sadr has shown that he can take the pulse of the street in a very effective way. I think that was my biggest impression. It was less what he said. What he said was the Americans better acknowledge who we are and acknowledge our
presence, but I thought that was less important than the other things about the interview, which were that it wasn’t about him himself; it was about his father’s movement and it was about the men around him who were going to shape the future of the movement, which was a street movement. It remains a street movement in a lot of ways—a popular movement.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** Did he say anything about what his plans were or what his response was or what he was going to do?

**Shadid:** I’ll tell you, I think they told me at the time he was 32 and you felt like he was ten years younger than that. He wouldn’t make eye contact, he spoke very softly, there was no authority in his voice. What he was basically saying was he was going to claim the mantle of his father. Most people say that his father was killed by the government a few years before. He said there was going to be a place for the clergy in the future of Iraq, that the Americans had to acknowledge the influence of the clergy and they had to use them as partners or better—things that remained the case that he said beyond that, but like I said, I don’t think his words were maybe as important as what he represented.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** So he didn’t imply that he was going to now fight against the American occupation.

**Shadid:** Well, you know, the movement itself was really interesting in 2003. It was really interesting how the movement changed back and forth, and it did. You could almost feel if you’d go there ... I’d visit Sadr’s men a lot, and their resentment—how they placed themselves vis à vis the Americans—changed over that year. And I don’t think it was inevitable what happened in April 2004 when Sadr’s men rose up. I think to them it was an existential question. If they didn’t rise up, the Americans were going to destroy them, and that’s why they rose up. I don’t think that clash itself was inevitable by any means and I think they would say the same thing. Sadr’s movement, like Hezbollah, for instance, in Lebanon, has a very deep sense of these questions that they see as existential—that their survival is threatened and that’s what followed. There were, when you look back to 2003 until April 2004, there were a sequence of events in Sadr City of misunderstandings in some way that created the resentments and created the suspicions that ended up shaping what happened in April 2004. But they weren’t inevitable; they took place over time.

**Question from the Audience:** This may be a question that shouldn’t come until the fifth installment of this series. But you’re saying that you feel the government is irrelevant. Would you say what would be the effect of our withdrawal from Iraq?

**Miller:** I don’t know the answer to that. We always ask ourselves, What’s the answer here? Where is there a good outcome? And we never come up with one, whether we stay or we go. I was telling someone today that a colleague of Khalid Huda’s said to me the other day that she’s Iraqi and she’s a journalist and she said ... I thought it was the perfect image because she said, “I feel like I’m dangling out of a window and holding on
to the arm of the United States, and I’m about 20 stories up and I can’t stand the fact that I’m being held up by the United States. I don’t want them in my country; I don’t want them holding me up. But if they let go, I’m going to splat to my death.” And I think that’s how a lot of Iraqis feel: that they don’t want us there and they don’t want us to leave. And there are times when it looks like … I mean, it has looked like, How much worse can it be? and that we’re part of the problem. I mean, clearly, we’re part of the problem. But is leaving the solution?

Shadid: I have to say that any prediction I make usually turns out to be wrong, so take that into account when I say this, but I think it is going to get worse. An American withdrawal is inevitable; it’s just when and the size of the withdrawal. I think the violence will get worse. I also think at the same time that as long as there is an American presence, I don’t see any real reconciliation taking place in Iraq. I think the Americans are always going to be perceived as the decision maker whether they are the decision maker or not, and until they’re removed from that equation…. I think reconciliation is possible in Iraq in the long-term, but it’s hard to see it as long as the Americans are perceived as the decision maker, which they will be as long as they’re there.

Question from the Audience: Speaking of resistance that was mentioned before, I’m wearing the color orange, which is against the war in Iraq and the impending war with Iran. And as journalists, you were there reporting on the impending war with Iraq and the buildup. You mentioned before not doing such a good job on WMDs. I wonder if you would address the elephant in the living room: Iran. Do you see similarities in the buildup towards that … towards a war, perhaps?

Miller: Well, I certainly see similarities in that we don’t have any more knowledge about what’s going on there than we did about Iraq. I don’t think we’re any better able to answer the big question, which is how far along is their nuclear program. The IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] hasn’t been able to answer that and we journalists haven’t been able to answer that. What is Iran doing in Iraq? We don’t know. We don’t have the answers to that. And what is the U.S. doing in Iran? We haven’t been able to find that out either. Will there be a strike on Iran? I can’t answer that. I could make all sorts of logical arguments on why there wouldn’t be. The military is against it, the public is against it, we don’t have troops that we might need. I don’t think a war in Iran would look like a war in Iraq. I think it would be an air war. How would Iran respond? How regionalized would it be? There’s no real logic to a war in Iran. Does that mean there won’t be one? No, not necessarily.

Question from the Audience (continued): We have ships in the Persian Gulf right now, right?

Miller: Plenty of ships. I think there are two fleets. Most of them are usually there, but the fact that…. You know, James Fallows wrote a piece on the best strategy on Iran about two years ago. Do you remember this piece in The Atlantic in which he said that that best strategy on Iran was to…. They had an Iran war game event. He came out with the statement that the best strategy on Iran is to pretend you’re going to go to war and never
go to war. I think it’s absolutely in the interest of the administration not to answer this question, and every time we try to answer this question, we get nowhere. We don’t even know who is running Iran policy in this administration.

Shadid: I do think there’s an incredible amount of disinformation out there. Al Jazeera was actually posting correspondence for the imminent invasion of Iran. I think there’s a lot out there that’s hard…. You don’t know what to believe and what not to believe.

Question from the Audience: I’d also like to thank you for being here tonight and for all your efforts. I’d like to ask you what it’s like in the Green Zone? How many non-foreigners are living and working outside of the Green Zone?

Miller: I would like to clarify. You may know, but not everyone knows, that most of the journalists don’t live in the Green Zone. We actually have our own little compound, which is not exactly free-wheeling. Most journalists live in what the Green Zone calls the Red Zone, and we live in a hotel and you have a house in the same compound that’s surrounded by blast walls and barbed wire and check points, and we have our own guards that we pay. In order to get to our floor in the hotel, you have to go through three check points to get in: one at the barricades, one at the entrance to the hotel, and one at the entrance to our floor. So we’re not exactly out among the folks, but we’re not in the Green Zone. The only journalists I know living in the Green Zone…. We have what we think of as a fall-back house in the Green Zone that we share with Newsweek and the Wall Street Journal. For us, if things get so bad you have to run, that’s where we would go. But I don’t know of any other journalists living in the Green Zone, do you?

Shadid: The amount of time journalists spend in the Green Zone isn’t that great. It’s just so hard to get in there.

Miller: And hard to get out once you’re in there. As remote as we often feel, at least you can get out and go to a market quickly or get out and go to someone’s home briefly and drive around. So we are less isolated than people in the Green Zone. And how many journalists are in Iraq today? There are only three U.S. newspapers with full-service, full-time coverage: The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and The Washington Post. And that means we each keep about three or four reporters on the ground at any given time plus a huge staff of 20 to 30 Iraqis who are working with us. There are probably eight or ten papers, American and British mostly, that keep one correspondent most of the time: The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Cox Newspapers, McClatchy, and the news magazines, and then the networks keep people. But there are 50 to 100 now, which is very small.

Question from the Audience (continued): Would you say the same thing holds for the NGO people?

Shadid: There are not that many NGOs that are staffed by non-Iraqis. There are some, but not many.
Miller: And they keep a very low profile. They don’t hang a sign out.

**Question from the Audience:** This is less of an Iraq-specific question, but I was just wondering: If you were embedded with the troops and you saw that they were about to be attacked but they didn’t notice, would your duty as a journalist be to get the story first or would your duty as an American be to tell the troops?

**Miller:** Duty to stay alive!

**Shadid:** Yeah. What an interesting question. I would never have thought of that. If you knew an attack was going to happen, would you do something to stop it?

**Question from the Audience (continued):** You wouldn’t get hurt, but the troops would.

**Shadid:** That’s a good question. I don’t know.

**Miller:** I think if they were going to be attacked, you would be attacked if you were with them. I just can’t even imagine that situation coming up.

**Shadid:** I have a colleague, David Finkel, who has talked about this a lot—the ethics of the narrative: what role do you put yourself in as an observer of a story? I tell you, he’s quite a hard-liner about it. You do not get involved in the story whatsoever. It changes the narrative, and if you change the narrative it’s not legitimate, or something like that. I think I violated that approach in every story I did in Iraq almost. There is a question about that: what’s your role as an observer and how you place yourself.

**Miller:** I was in that position once in El Salvador. I was coming down from seeing the guerillas in the mountains and I passed guerillas on the road and stopped and talked to them—not people I had been with—and then I went down farther and got stopped at an army check point. And they asked me if there were any insurgents up the road and I said no because I thought that I was revealing information to them that I shouldn’t be revealing. But I later thought that was the wrong answer because I felt that I was giving false information, which was no better than giving information and that in fact I could have led them to their deaths where they might not have gone. So I later decided that the right answer was to have said yes, be careful, there are rebels up there.

**Shadid:** I remember there was a story that I did toward the end of the invasion part of the war where I was writing about Baghdad’s defenses, and I regret that story in a way because I think you almost cross the line in writing that kind of story. You are offering intelligence or you’re serving in a capacity that you’re often accused of being, which is a spy. I kind of regretted that story after I had written it. In hindsight, I wish I hadn’t done it.

**Question from the Audience.** I also want to thank you for being here. I think your perspective is very valuable. I just have a question. When you were talking about the occupation, as journalists … maybe I didn’t understand what you were saying, but did
you know ahead of time that there was going to be an occupation or did you just think it was going to be taking Saddam down and then out of there? Because you seemed to be surprised at the Iraqi who said, when he saw the tanks and the American flags on the tanks, “No, this is an occupation.” So I’m just curious. You did not know ahead of time?

**Miller:** It seems incredibly naïve now, but I was not prepared for a long American occupation of Iraq, and I don’t think they were prepared. Otherwise, they would have gone in with more troops to control the looting and control the security. Does that mean they weren’t planning to put in permanent bases? No, but I think they thought they were going to be greeted with roses and that they were going to have a friendly government in place very quickly because that’s what Chalabi was telling them, and I think they thought they would put Chalabi in place. And then I think they thought they could withdraw to their bases and live happily ever after in Iraq.

**Shadid:** I didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t think the Americans were going to be welcomed there, by any means. It’s an Arab country, it’s the Arab world. We talked about the policies that accumulated over years and decades. I knew it was going to be inhospitable at some level, but did I imagine a five-year war? Did I imagine a full-fledged occupation? Like Marjorie, I thought they were going to try to install a government and get out as quickly as possible. Would that government face its own insurgency? Would there be a military coup? Who knew? But I didn’t think the Americans were going to try to run the place.

**Miller:** Traditionally, that’s what the U.S. did. They went in and they put in a friendly government, and then they got out. Certainly, it would have been much easier for us.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I have another question. Is that because there was such very good propaganda before the war that you also bought into the fact that…. You were on the ground before the war, so….

**Shadid:** They didn’t know what they were going to do. My understanding of it is that these were policy decisions that were made after the government fell. Bremer decides to do a full-fledged occupation, but that wasn’t Garner’s intention when he was there in those first couple of weeks. Policy took shape after the government fell in a way that I don’t think was planned beforehand. I may have that wrong.

**Miller:** What Garner was planning and what was being planned…. Why were we so surprised? We just kept saying to each other, There must be a plan. They can’t really come in here and just leave a trail of chaos. I remember being shocked, but why we were shocked….

**Question from the Audience (continued):** One more question: As journalists, I feel that sometimes intuition works very well. So, would you say that it was your intuition that was saying, Well, there must be a plan? Or was there word out on the streets that there was going to be a plan?
Miller: I think it was wishful thinking, because the alternative, as we have seen, was horrible. And I don’t know if it was denial, but I just think….

Shadid: Like I said, the idea of the Americans actually occupying an Arab country…. As someone who had worked in the Arab world for quite a while, to me it was beyond…. Were we really going to occupy an Arab country with what occupation means and what occupation entails? We saw the results of it. We saw the result of what happens when it tries to occupy an Arab country: it destroyed it in a lot of respects.

Question from the Audience: We have covered Iraq, Iran, oil, the Middle East, Latin America, and I’d like to add one more factor. That would be Venezuela and Hugo Chavez. Based on your personal take and your intuition, how much importance should we give Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan socialism that he’s building and the influence that he’s creating within America and the connection that he has with oil and Iran?

Miller: How much importance as a threat to the United States?

Question from the Audience (continued): Right, as an inflation factor on oil prices and as a possible divisive factor within America.

Miller: I don’t think he has any influence on the United States. I think he has potentially a little bit of influence on world oil prices. What are they? The number four oil producer, I believe. So far, stability or instability in Venezuela has had no impact on oil prices compared to what’s going on in the Middle East. And I think politically in Latin America, Chavez has also had minimal impact. You’ve seen a slight leftward drift in a series of elections in Latin America, but they’re not traditional Chavez or Cuban Socialist leftists. They’re much more mainstream…. Even the word “leftist” is arguable in these leaders, so I would say that his influence is not that great.

Question from the Audience: How central is religion to the everyday interactions of the man on the street in Iraq? Are the Sunnis only dealing with the Sunnis and the Shias with other Shias, or are people willing to talk to someone and engage with them without knowing their religion and without caring? For example, when you were interviewing people, did they want to know what you were before they would talk to you?

Shadid: Because my family is Lebanese-American and I think because of Lebanese contacts, they were a little bit interested. Sectarian identity is very pronounced in Lebanon. I can’t stress enough how much things have changed in Baghdad over the years in terms of this notion of identity. It was just not … it would be a really rude question before the invasion to ask someone whether they were Sunni or Shia. You just wouldn’t do it. You really wouldn’t. And if you would, you were an American. Only an American would ask a question like that. But I think it has changed. This is a phrase that a friend of mine used in Lebanon when he was talking about sectarian antagonism, and it’s that each community doesn’t have a guarantee of survival anymore. And I think that’s what we’re dealing with in Iraq at a certain level: there aren’t guarantees of survival, so survival at some level is assured by this reformulation of community, this
reformulation of a sectarian identity that’s manufactured at some level that wasn’t there before. And it does color everything now, and it makes me very sad to say that because I see what it’s doing to the place. It’s destroying it. Even inside our bureau, for instance, how people relate to each other: it’s ever-present, in a way. Can that be reversed over time? Can it fade again? Perhaps, but it’s awesome. I don’t know the right word to use, but it’s startling to me to see how it has evolved in just a few short years.

**Question form the Audience (continued):** Does that mean that they don’t talk to each other?

**Shadid:** People talk. There’s everyday interaction that goes on, but you pretty much know somebody’s sect at this point. It’s similar in Lebanon, in some ways. When you get into a taxi and somebody will ask, What village are you from, first. And then, What’s your family name? Where did you go to school? Where do you live? There’s a sequence of questions you can ask to try to find out in hopes of getting it without saying it up front, and I think that goes on in Iraq as well. There are these indicators that will suggest who you are and who you aren’t.

**Miller:** But a lot of Baghdad, in particular, has been segregated now so that the interactions are fewer. Many people live within their own community now so they don’t come into contact with the other sects.

**Gonnerman:** Anthony Shadid, Marjorie Miller, thank you very much for joining us for this first of five conversations in the *Iraq: Reframe* series. Good night. [Applause]

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**Anthony Shadid**

Reporter Anthony Shadid has written for the Associated Press, *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. He is the author of *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War*, a book based on his reporting in Iraq for which he was awarded the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting. His stories from Iraq have also earned him an American Society of Newspaper Editors Award for deadline news reporting and the Overseas Press Club's Hal Boyle Award for best newspaper or wire-service reporting from abroad. While at *The Boston Globe*, he was awarded the 2002 George Polk Award for Foreign Reporting for a series of dispatches from the Middle East. An Arab American of Lebanese descent, he was born and raised in Oklahoma and now lives in Washington, D.C. and Marjayoun, Lebanon.

**Marjorie Miller (interviewer)**

Prior to being named foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Marjorie Miller held bureau chief positions for the newspaper in London, Jerusalem, Bonn, Mexico City and San Salvador.

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