

Interview with Edward Wong

CHARLES FERGUSON: Great. Tell us your name.

EDWARD WONG: Uh, I'm Edward Wong, with the *New York Times*, here in Baghdad.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When did you first come to Baghdad?

EDWARD WONG: I first got here in November of 2003, right as the insurgency was starting to gain momentum.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When you arrived, what were your first impressions of Baghdad, of Iraq, of the occupation?

EDWARD WONG: Ts-, uh, when I first arrived; I mean, the occupation's fairly evident here. You saw, uh, convoys through the streets; um, concertina wire. Uh, and at that time, the, um, idea of violence, uh, had started to creep into a lot of people's minds, but it still hadn't reached near-y, nearly the [net] level that it's at right now. So I think that, um, the occupation looked like what, in some ways, what I imagined, uh, it would appear to be from what I read before I got here. I mean, the presence of American troops. Uh, and it hadn't reached a level yet where there was a sense of paranoia on both sides; on the Americans' part and on the Iraqis' part, I think, about, uh, exactly how to react to each other.

Um, and on our part, on the part of civilians who were here, we were, uh, much more comfortable at that time going through the streets, hanging out in markets, going to restaurants, doing other things that you would in regular life in any city around the world.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Tell us more

EDWARD WONG: Uh, well right now, it's a lot harder to go about, um, doing a lot of the daily activities out in the streets. Um, I think that we still manage to get out a lot. I think more than almost any other news organiz-, organization here, we get out and report the story.

Um, whenever we're working on a big story, we manage to arrange our interviews.

But uh, the caveat to that is that our interviews are done, you know, in a very, um, strategic manner. We go in; we get the interview; and then we come out, and we come back to our compound.

We don't spend time, ts-, uh, in restaurants or hanging out at cafés, or spending a lot of time walking the s-, the streets, talking to different Iraqis. Uh, we will do that. But we'll do it only for short amounts of time, in the, before returning to our compound here.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And describe — not in the specifics, 'cause I understand you can't describe them — describe the general extent of your security arrangements.

EDWARD WONG: Um, the, generally, we have, uh, an armed force that, uh, guards the compound. And then when we do go out, uh, into the streets, or to do interviews, uh, outside of people's homes, then we do bring guards with us — Iraqi guards, generally — uh, and we usually travel in pairs of cars, rather than just in one car.

CHARLES FERGUSON: After you'd been here a few months, what did you think of the American occupation, and whether it was going to be successful? What opinion did you form by, say, early 2004?

EDWARD WONG: Well I think when, um, early 2004, we saw the insurgency, um, starting to rise. Uh, we saw the violence starting to creep up. And I think, um, a lot of the reporters here on the ground were s-, asking questions about what the whether it was, um, ts-, whether the...

CHARLES FERGUSON: What did you see, what did you think about then? What did you conclude? What did you feel? Etcetera?

EDWARD WONG: Right. By ear-, um, early 2004, I don't think, um, I didn't have a strong opinion at that time about which direction things were going, because at that time, it was, I was still fairly new here; I'd only been here a few months, and was still trying to, um, you know, gather the facts, and figure out exactly what was going on. I did see the violence rising. And I think at, and the politics was in this, uh, state of flux. Uh, we saw the Iraqis starting to become more vocal in what they wanted from the Americans.

Um, and so I think that at that time, we were still tryin' to figure out exactly what, what the po-, impact of American policy was.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When did you first conclude that the occupation was in real trouble?

EDWARD WONG: I think, uh, the, that happened in April of 2004, basically, when you had the two-front uprising against, um, ts-, against the Americans; both Muqtada al-Sadr and then, uh, this, um, more widespread Sunni Arab uprising that started with events in Fallujah. And I think that that showed that there was a huge wellspring of hostility against the Americans, and that the Americans would have to, um, s-, go about, eh, uh, their, um, activities in a different manner; either change some policies or revisit some things that they had done in the past.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And how do you think the Americans handled that situation? Did they do it well; badly; what was their basic stance?

EDWARD WONG: You mean, um, in terms of the mistakes at that time, or before that?

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah. At that time.

EDWARD WONG: Well, at that time, I think it was, uh, pretty clear that their response using, um, extreme, probably extreme force, and then especially the response to Muqtada, I think, in hindsight, it looks, uh, ts-, like either a fairly naive response, or a misguided response: the fact that they would, at the same time that you had this, um, ts-, Sunni Arab hostility on the rise, you look[ed], you took Muqtada, and you tried to, uh, one, shut down his newspaper, and then arrest one of his top aides, um, without realizing the implications of what might happen with him and with his militia, the Mahdi Army.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And do you think that the Americans should have been tougher then, and really taken him off the board? Or do you think that they should have been gentler?

EDWARD WONG: Ts-, uh, I'm not sure. I, I don't know what the proper answer would have been. I mean, I see arguments on both sides, and, and I could easily see, um, ts-, either being tougher and, uh, because right now, he's still a problem here. And he, uh, his militia is accused by a lot of people of being responsible for a lot of the sectarian violence going on right now. Um...

And at the same time, there, I do think that there is an argument to be made that [UI] took a softer approach, and [UI] into the political process earlier; uh, tried to bring him in that [way], that maybe that would have helped quiet him down earlier. And maybe it would have helped to, um take the edges off of some of his anti-American, uh, resentment.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. Okay. Now back to the earlier behavior of the Americans. Now you've been here several years.

EDWARD WONG: Right.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And as we briefly discussed yesterday, there's a by-now kind of conventional canon of what the Americans did wrong. Why don't you go through that list, and say what you now think about those, about that list, and the things on it?

EDWARD WONG: Okay. Well I think that the, uh, in terms of the, uh, um, generally the perceived, or the common wisdom, about some of the, uh, big mistakes that the Americans made; it starts, I think, um, I mean obviously, there's a list of mistakes that they made before the, uh, invasion, again. But in terms of the earlier ones: uh, in the early days of the occupation, when Bremer first came in, we have the, um, disbanding of the Iraqi army, which, you know, let, left hundreds of thousands of people without jobs; uh, people who were trained in the military, and who, um, would have instant resentment towards the Americans and towards the occupation.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Can we actually, let me poke at that a little bit. As you probably know — I've read Bremer's book, as I'm sure you have; I've interviewed Walt Slocombe at great length about this: The people who made that decision — mainly those two men — defend it with three arguments. The argument that they make are, first of all, the Iraqi army had completely disbanded itself.

EDWARD WONG: Right.

CHARLES FERGUSON: That there was nothing left to disband. That all you were doing was legally ratifying something that had in fact already occurred.

EDWARD WONG: Right.

CHARLES FERGUSON: The second argument they make is that the army was fatally flawed; that it had 10,000 mostly Sunni Baathist corrupt generals; it had oppressed, resentful Shiite conscripts; and that it was not something that you could possibly reconstitute without using a lot of coercion and force and generating a lot of resentment and having a dysfunctional organization at the end.

And the third argument is that reconstituting the army would generate enormous resentment from the Shiites. And Bremer in particular says that Sistani wouldn't have permitted it.

I think Slocombe told me that too.

What do you think of those arguments?

EDWARD WONG: Well I think that if you look at the [UI] that was left here back in, and that still exists today, um, you had to, uh, make a couple choices. One was either keep an Iraqi force in power that could, um, at least enforce some semblance of order; and then while that force was still here in power, uh, work to, um, to reform it or to revise certain elements of it; revise the officer class, or to change the demographics; um, change the way it operates, and maybe have, have the American oversight of it at that time.

Um, the other, um, thing you could have done was to have a lot more, uh, troops in here at the time, to enforce law and order; either foreign forces, American forces, or other forces. And neither one of those happened. So then you had a power vacuum. Either way, I don't think anyone argues [of] the fact that looking at that time, you had to have some sort of military force here that could, uh, that could impress order on the people, and that would make people afraid, um, to step out of bounds, or at least ins-, or even to command respect from the people.

Um, traditionally, in Iraq, that was done with the military. And in many countries in the Middle East, that was done with the military. And so you had to have some sort of armed force here, with numbers. And um, I think that you had to go either with the Iraqi force that existed, and as you point out the mistakes, in the, the problems with that force, you could work then to reform [it]. Or you would have to have more troops on the ground.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. So do you think that there was nothing to their arguments, or do you think that their arguments might have had force, but if so, that just means that it was all the more imperative to have more Americans?

EDWARD WONG: Uh, I mean again, I think that their argument that they do have, there are valid points to their arguments. Uh, I'm not sure how you would weight that against, uh, the other a-, alternatives. I don't know what, you know, what the cost benefit calculations were going on at that time.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. All right. So anyway, that was the first item on the list. Continue.

EDWARD WONG: Uh, the, uh, I mean another, um, mistake that I think a lot of people point to is the, uh, are the Iraqis whom they chose to enshrine in power at that time, on the Iraqi Governing Council. Uh, the question is, you know, were these Iraqis representative of people? Did they have popular support? Did they understand Iraq? Had [they] given the proper advice to the Bush administration before the invasion?

And I think if you look at a lot of the people who were chosen to be Iraqi leaders, [then] you can question basically both the credibility as well as their motivations at that time. And um, and by putting those people in power, then it helps eventually to perpetuate, uh, the, you know, the acquisition of power by those people.

So now, you have enshrined in the Iraqi political system this set of people — many of them [were] exiles from before — who, uh, are ruling Iraq right now. And you don't see a lot of homegrown Iraqi politicians, or Iraqi leaders; people who, uh, to the ordinary Iraqis here, feel came from their set of beliefs, or their set of circumstances, and are able to, to lead the country in a strong manner.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. Next.

EDWARD WONG: Um, the, uh, the idea of de-Baathification. Um, and basically, the question of how strongly to purge the government of Baathist influences was a very controversial one then. And eventually, it was, uh, reversed to a certain degree by Bremer, um, almost a year later, after that order. So I think that, um, the repudiation of that by the Americans, and there [is] a recognition that that was, uh, that we might have gone too far in the early stages.

Um, I think that some of the Shiite leaders pushed very hard for that. Uh, but it was also Kurdish leaders, because, uh, they felt, you know, very much victimized during the 1990s, as well as

beforehand. And there was a lot of hostility towards the Baath Party, uh, and the Americans did use, um, you know, a lot of, uh, very rancorous language to describe the Baath Party. But, uh, it was unclear whether the Americans, uh, occupation recognized that a lot of people had joined the Baath Party, uh, merely for practical purposes, or for purposes to advance their career, and weren't necessarily [ideologues? idealized?] in the Baath Party, and um, didn't have blood on their hands.

So the idea of purging it, a lot of these people might have provided the [UI] for bureaucracy; um, technocrats, in the government; um, I think served to weaken, uh, aspects of the government, as well as create more hostility among, uh, the people who were fired from their jobs.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. And the others?

EDWARD WONG: Uh...those are, those are probably the major points that I can think of off of the top of my head.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. How about instituting an occupation as opposed to transferring sovereignty, stopping local elections early on? What do you think of those decisions?

EDWARD WONG: Um, I don't know. I don't necessarily have an opinion there. I can see an argument going both ways. I'm not sure that transferring to, um, an Iraqi sovereign power immediately would have necessarily helped. There was a power vacuum. There was no one the Americans had, um, who commanded credibility among the Iraqi people.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

EDWARD WONG: And the people who the Americans have pegged, um, to be, uh, you know, the, their...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Sure, of course.

EDWARD WONG: ...weren't necessarily the right ones, so...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah, yeah. Okay. How about the two earlier decisions: one made before the war; one made just at the end of the war; the first being the force levels used, the troop levels used. And the second being allowing the looting. What do you think of the effect of those things?

EDWARD WONG: I think the idea of letting, um, the looters run rampant, uh, basically undermined confidence in the Americans among a lot of Iraqi people. Even now, when I talk to a lot of Iraqis, some of them will bring up the looting. And that was, for them it was this, um, ts-, uh, epochal, um, point in the, in the war, that they looked at this, and saw that there was no power, there was no authority that would come in and actually, um, impress law and order on this place, and that the Americans weren't necessarily here for the good of the Iraqis.

Um, a lot of people, uh, you know, like people in the Baghdad Museum, for example; um, went up to American armored vehicles that were nearby, and asked them, uh, why don't you just, you know, put your, uh, vehicles around the museum?

And he said, we had, we have orders that we can't move from our spots.

And things like that really, I think, made the Iraqis question whether or not the Americans were here to help them. And also whether the Americans would be able to, um, keep society together, uh, in a way that, uh, Saddam had been able to.

Even, even if the Iraqis hated Saddam, um, a lot of them, right now, are asking: Why have the Americans been unable to, um, keep the fragments together in the way that Saddam was able to?

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. Now tell us where you think Iraq is now. We're having this conversation in early April of 2006.

EDWARD WONG: Right. Um, I think right now, uh, what's going on is you're seeing this, um, cycle of violence, um, among the Iraqis ramp up. And basically the Americans, uh, both on the military side and on the political side, are trying, um, desperately, [I do think], to keep the country from sliding further towards full-scale civil war.

Uh, I th-, there's a lot of arguments from the Americans and from the Bush administration saying the country is, uh, nowhere near civil war.

So you, you see this very, um, you know, uh, rigorous debate going on among the Americans, among the Iraqis. A lot of them are saying that, uh, it's much worse now than, than, than it's ever been during the three years since the toppling of Saddam. And a lot of them do fear, um, the sectarian

bloodshed, um, [racking up] to a much great level. I think a lot of them are afraid of the militias. They don't see any solutions to the militia problem right now.

Um, I know a lot of Iraqis who are trying to figure out ways [to get] out of the country. Uh, within the country, you're seeing a lot of migration, um, from mixed areas; a lot of people, for example, a lot of Shiites in mixed Sunni/Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad, like [UI] [moving] to predominantly Shiite neighborhoods in the city, or moving south to Najaf.

Uh, I think that's one of the signs of a, uh, disintegration of society. Uh, but I think there's also still, in general, um, a sliver of hope, or some sense of optimism among the Iraqis here. Uh, I think the, they're clinging to the notion that, um, there's a chance that Iraq can pull out of this. There's a lot of skepticism about the Iraqi leaders, and about the politicians. Um, and I think a lot of Iraqis see them as selfish, and unmotivated, in terms of thinking of the greater good. But they're still holding out hope that, um, you know, maybe with the new government, if a new government is formed, that that new government will be able to pull it all together.

CHARLES FERGUSON: What's your own sense of the Iraqi leadership? Do you agree with popular assessment in that regard?

EDWARD WONG: Um, I don't, I think that...I've seen, um, in the recent weeks, I've seen both good and bad from the Iraqi leadership. I mean, you see the leadership, um, [go into] these very bitter talks over government negotiation. And to some, on some level, you wonder, uh, whether they're just out for themselves, while the rest of the country is burning, for example.

But at the same time, um, right after the shrine bombing last February, when, uh, some Shiite militias ran rampant through the streets; um, a lot of them step up in a day or two, right afterwards; especially the, some of the clerics. And they called for, uh, they called for people to stay calm. And I think if they had wanted to push the country to civil war; if they wanted to consolidate their power through violence, at that time they could have either let the, uh, let some of the violence continue, or they could have pushed, uh, their militias to [do it] even greater harm.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And the increase in sectarianism and sectarian violence that has characterized Iraqi society over the last several years, and now seems to be growing quite extreme: Do you think that that was inevitable? Or do you think that it wasn't?

EDWARD WONG: I don't think, um, sectarian violence, or ethnic violence is, um, is inevitable. Like I don't, I think just from, you know, studying the past history of these types of conflicts, I think it's usually politically motivated, and it's usually, uh, because of resentments stirred up by political leaders who are trying to amass power. I mean, you saw that in Bosnia; you know that that happened in Rwanda. I mean, there's basis for some foundation for it, [right], in earlier policies, such as colonial policies, from the British or French eras in these countries. But um, but I don't think it's inevitable.

Um, I do think that the, uh, Americans, um, might have underestimated the amount of tension that might arise between different sects, or different ethnicities here before they came to the country. Um, I think that, uh, that's one of the reasons why I think that even if the Americans had instituted certain policies correctly, such as, um, taken a different view on disbanding the army, for example, they still might have had, um, entirely different set of tough circumstances to deal with.

And so it's unclear whether or not, um, the American project would have succeeded quickly even if they had made certain proper decisions at the beginning. I think that they would have had to, um, recognize the facts on the ground first, before, uh, you know, from a very early stage, and put certain policies into motion.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Then what does it mean to say that the descent into sectarian violence and sectarianism isn't or wasn't inevitable? What does that statement mean?

Um, I think that maybe there might have been, uh, ways to prevent it. I mean, maybe it depends on what, uh, what types of leadership; uh, what leaders were enabled to take power earlier on, or what kind of, uh, you know, watching carefully what kind of rhetoric certain people used. Um, I think a lot does depend on the, on the Iraqi leadership and on who took power, and how they were placed into power.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Who in particular?

EDWARD WONG: Uh, I think that if you look at, um, some of the...um, you know, may-, some of the Shiite leaders have used very, um, very bitter language, uh, and have enabled militias — like for ex-, in the last couple years. And you've got Muqtada, with his militia. You've got, for example, uh, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim with his militia. And, and then you've got Hakim's party running the Interior Ministry, which is accused of, um, of sponsoring death squads; uh, police in uniforms, for example.

And I think the, um, the idea of militias or death squads within the uniformed forces has been one of the most divisive elements in Iraqi society in the last year. Um...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Is it in fact true?

EDWARD WONG: Uh, uh, I think there is a lot of evidence that it's happening. And the Americans themselves have captured people wearing uniforms. And they've said that, American generals have said, we just captured death squad. They're, we found, like, a dozen, or two dozen men, um, in uniforms, hauling off a guy whom they claimed to be a Sunni. And say that they were going to execute him.

Um, it's unclear, like, the thing is, it's unclear — the people wearing uniforms — whether or not, um, they're officially sanctioned members of the police forces; whether they're people who were given a wink and a nod by the police forces to, you know, take the, you know, um, take on those uniforms, and go around. There's just no accountability within the Interior Ministry right now. It's a very amorphous institution.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. Okay. Care to venture any guesses as to what's going to happen?

EDWARD WONG: Um, I really have no idea what might happen. I mean, w-, all I can state is that the pattern the last three years is that it's been, that the violence has been getting worse.

Uh, and it might be changing in nature. Like for example, in the last five months, we've seen it, a decrease in American deaths. Uh, which, uh, taken, uh, by itself might look like it's a, a positive

harbinger. But when you look at those five months, you see a huge ramping up in Iraqi civilian deaths, for example. And you see that; that's pushing a country closer towards, um, civil war.

So if it keeps moving that direction, and it looks possible. But like I was saying, I think that, um, some Iraqis — a lot of Iraqis — still hold up s-, hold out some hope here, and are looking at their leaders, to see whether the leaders can pull back, pull them back, pull the country back.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. What do you think of the administration's policy now, and the realism or accuracy of the administration's assessments, assumptions, behavior?

EDWARD WONG: Um, I think within the administration, you're seeing, um, different messages come out. I think before, uh, in, during the earlier years of the war, you saw a more, uh, I guess it was a more single-minded message coming from throughout the administration. And now you see people giving different messages.

I think you see, um, at the highest levels, you see Bush, um, acknowledging that there were problems made. Um, and, but still saying that Iraqi can move forward, and that, uh, there is a lot of, uh, positive elements out there.

But I think on the ground here, you see someone like the ambassador making much, um, blunter statements, for example, saying that, uh, the American invasion here opened up a Pandora's box. Um, and saying that the shrine bombing pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war.

Um, he still says that Iraq hasn't stepped over that line yet. Um, and then you see, um, you know, right outside, on the peripheries of the administration, you see someone like former prime minister Ayad Alawi, who had, um, in the past couple years, had told the Bush [alliances] — he's a close, um, close ally of the administration's — now he's coming out and saying that Iraq is already in a civil war.