

May 14, 2003

## Two Right Feet

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Two right feet. That was the tipoff. The skeleton in the coffin had two right feet.

The skeleton, actually just a skull and a pile of bones, was in one of the 33 wooden coffins laid out in the courtyard of the Jumhuriya Mosque in Basra, a port city in southern Iraq. It was part of a collection of skeletal remains found in one of several mass graves that dot the countryside here. You can still see the blindfolds wrapped around the eye sockets of each human skull, and the ropes that bound the feet before people were shot.

The unearthing of these remains is both very important and very sad. It is important because they bear silent witness to what an engine of human mass destruction Saddam Hussein's regime was. It is sad, though, because Iraqi families, desperate to find their missing loved ones, have been haphazardly digging up any suspected mass grave site. Because the sites have not been secured by U.S. or British troops -- who told the locals they don't have enough men to do that -- the graves are being opened before any international authority or human rights organizations can properly document, photograph and catalog what the sites contain.

This will make it very difficult to connect the bodies with lists that the Baath regime itself kept of those it executed and then use this as evidence in a criminal tribunal. Hence the open coffin in the mosque courtyard with two right feet -- bodies get jumbled together.

So just as it is becoming increasingly clear that many weapons sites -- including nuclear research sites -- which might have proved that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, have been looted and the evidence scattered, the same is happening with sites of his human mass destruction. The U.S. had no plan or teams in place to secure the Iraqi sites, as it did in Bosnia.

Lord knows that with tens of thousands of people having disappeared under Saddam's regime, there should be plenty of evidence of his barbarity around. But hard evidence is important. A key element in the war crimes case against the Serb tyrant Slobodan Milosevic has become just a handful of killings, which, thanks to proper forensic analysis and documentation, investigators were able to retrace right up the chain of command.

The bones in the Jumhuriya Mosque came from one of several mass grave sites near Basra that were apparently filled with young men killed by the Baath regime after Saddam's henchmen assassinated a popular Shiite cleric in 1999, sparking a mini-uprising. Families started digging up these sites when the local Baath office was looted and a list was found of people executed at that time.

"We went to one of these sites on April 23," said Sam Zia-Zarifi from Human Rights Watch. "And we found the spot was covered with ammunition. First, we feared that the families would just start digging and blow themselves up. Our second fear was that they would start digging,

period -- and thus make it impossible to positively identify remains and use those sites for any accountability in the future. We notified [Jay Garner's] office. They said they would secure it, but it never happened.

"Our experience everywhere is that you literally cannot move ahead in a country like Iraq unless you can somehow account for who did what to whom," he added. "Sometimes people may want to forgive; sometimes they may want to punish. But everywhere it is important that people know. People are going to want to know: Who is this new police chief? Is he someone who killed my son? And it is important to bring the bad guys to justice with some real evidence."

As someone who never believed Saddam had any weapons of mass destruction that threatened us, but that this war could easily be justified by his mass destruction of his own people, I find this chaotic loss of evidence particularly sad.

America is the occupying power of Iraq. It has legal obligations, and one of them is to secure mass graves and not to simply dismiss looting, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld did, with his shameful toss-off line: "Stuff happens." People expect more from us. The U.S. military executed its war plan with great efficiency and decency. For that, most Iraqis are grateful, and every American can be proud. But when it comes to securing the peace, either there was no plan, or those executing it simply did not have the manpower or know-how to pull it off. Either way, we have gone from the clarity of war to what Mr. Zia-Zarifi calls "the fog of peace." We dare not get lost in there.