

Why are you going to China?

—*One of my roommates, when I told  
her I was going to study in Beirut*

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# Preface

In February 2003 I left the University of Michigan to spend my final semester at the American University of Beirut. I went to Beirut for various reasons, including a desire to locate distant relations (my maternal grandparents are first-generation Lebanese immigrants). I also wanted to be somewhere I could go skiing. But most of all I wanted to be in a place where American students feared to tread, where they didn't even think to go. I like proving to people that their preconceptions are misconceptions. When I was an intern for the Associated Press in Detroit, I walked the entirety of Eight Mile Road, the rough-and-ready border between Detroit and the suburbs. One side of the road was thick with urban rot; the other was edged with tidy tree-lined streets and single-family homes. My mother warned that I was going to get mugged, or worse. My entire walk took place after dark, but all I found were people. They were the people who worked in the strip clubs or hit the bars after a hard day at an auto plant. They were the people who lived along the main thoroughfare. I didn't end up dead because I was a white boy walking around north Detroit. I ended up hanging out with the people I found there.

With war in Iraq almost a certainty, Beirut seemed like an especially good place to break down barriers. I found an apart-

ment two blocks from the Mediterranean, not far from the parking lot that had once been the U.S. embassy. (The embassy was blown up twice in the 1980s before they moved it to a fortified compound in the suburbs.) Before long I was marching with Lebanese students and a handful of internationals to protest the American invasion of Iraq. We marched in solidarity with the Lebanese demonstrators, holding signs identifying ourselves as American: the Lebanese police were too afraid to turn tear gas and water cannons on internationals. We voiced our disgust. The day the bombing began in Baghdad, students blocked the doors to all the classrooms, though most of us had already decided to skip class and attend a march to the British embassy. After the march ended I stayed with the kids hurling rocks through the embassy windows, dodging tear gas, fire hoses, and rifle butts. I was amazed. Here they were, expressing the outrage so many of my peers and I feel, but in a manner we would never dare.

My friends in Beirut often asked me, “You are an American who opposes the war. But what are you really doing about it?”

“I’m writing about what I see here,” I would say. “I’m telling people in America what people outside America are saying. And I’m reassuring people here that everyone in America hasn’t gone nuts.”

But it happened over and over again.

I was sitting in a bar in Beirut the night the war started, with Mira and Rania, two friends who always took me to task for being American. My French was less than perfect; my Arabic was nonexistent. Here I was, a kid from the Midwest in the Mideast, just hanging out. They knew how I felt toward my government, they knew that I didn’t hold the same prejudices and misconceptions as many Americans, and so we usually didn’t get stuck on questions of motivation, or on questions of blame. But on that night it was all too much. Rania started crying.

“Why would they do this? Why do Americans want to make war?”

Maybe it was just machismo. Maybe it was because the dis-

tance between Beirut and Baghdad is less than that between Detroit and New York. I decided to go to Baghdad. I was in the position to do it, so why not? It was considerably less of a sacrifice than many of my compatriots were being asked to make. It suddenly became entirely real to me that a large part of the story of my generation was unfolding not too far to the east. At the very least, I could bear witness.

“I’m going to Baghdad,” I told Rania.

I don’t remember now if those words stopped the tears or not, though that was the hoped-for result.

“Are you serious?”

I had been talking for twenty-two years. Now I had my chance. During Easter break I would go to Baghdad. I went to the embassy and applied for a visa, standing next to a long line of Lebanese men who were going to Iraq to fight. The visa never came—the Iraqi government fell first. In the meantime I kept trying to convince my Lebanese friends to make the trip with me. I would need someone who spoke Arabic. But in the end none of them would do it. That was when Ralph called.

Ralph had come to Beirut on a whim. He was twenty-four, with a master’s degree in chemistry from Oxford. He had spent some time working in a lab, but his real passion seemed to be international relations. When he got tired of the lab, he managed, with a little help from connections, to land an internship of sorts at a British daily; from there he decided to go to Beirut to study Arabic. We met because we were both freelancing for the *Daily Star*, Lebanon’s English-language daily. While Ralph was home on Easter break, his mum suggested he open an English-language paper in Baghdad after the war. “They’re going to need one, right?” she asked him.

She later said she hadn’t meant it seriously. Regardless, it stuck. Ralph only had about six months of actual experience in journalism, so he called me. I was standing in downtown Beirut, and the only thing that occurred to me was that an open-ended trip to Baghdad might cause problems for graduation and the AP job I’d lined up.

“If you can get the money, I’ll do it,” I said. So I stalled my plans to travel to Baghdad and waited for Ralph to come back to Beirut. A few days later we were in Amman. This was my chance.

“You oppose the war, but what are you doing about it?”

Now I really could say I was doing something.

Ralph and I had originally conceived of the *Baghdad Bulletin* as a daily newspaper before deciding that the problems of staffing, distribution, and production made insightful daily journalism in Baghdad a pointless endeavor. I envisioned (modestly, of course) a sort of *Harper’s* for the Middle East, an intellectual magazine that could somehow draw together all of the issues for which Baghdad had suddenly become the nexus. The actual paper turned out to be a little more like the *Economist* in its form, but almost entirely unique in its content. An English-language magazine in a war zone. We ran for seven issues, twice monthly, printing ten thousand copies of each issue and distributing them around the country. We were getting at least as many readers on our Web site, where the paper was available for free download.

To give an idea of exactly what we were trying to accomplish, I’m reprinting a response I wrote to a reader’s letter in the summer of 2003. The letter read, in part:

*As I was reading the articles I began to ponder the reality of the Baghdad Bulletin. It seems bizarre in the extreme, when one thinks about it, that such a publication would be established and set up by outsiders.*

My response:

First, we do not intend to present ourselves as authoritative, only honest. The target audience of the *Bulletin* is anyone in Iraq who speaks English (and there are a lot of English-speaking Iraqis), and the plan is to eventually publish two issues, one in Arabic, one in English, with the same content. It is extremely important to have English-language reporting here on the ground right now because English speakers (the

Coalition especially) are going to be making most of the decisions—it's an unfortunate fact, but they should be making them based on good information, and there should be a publication here to challenge and examine those decisions (in English) as well.

The media here should not be controlled and edited by foreigners, and much of it is not. We are one of the many new publications in Iraq—freedom of the press has been one of the happiest by-products of the invasion.

The intent is not to have foreign journalists writing most of the articles, but to begin training Iraqi journalists to take over the publication, eventually writing all of the foreign staff out of the equation and leaving the *Bulletin* here as a locally owned and operated publication. The situation is as it is at this point because, quite simply, there are not very many well-trained journalists here. Thirty years of oppressive rule have taken a toll. We are encouraging Iraqi involvement as much as possible and rely heavily on the advice and contributions from our Iraqi staff, which do outnumber the foreign staff at the magazine. . . .

Iraq should demand world attention, and I suspect it is unlikely anyone locally would have set up a Web site and magazine people would be interested in reading internationally so quickly. We are providing a much greater readership for Iraqi writers than they would receive anywhere else. Also, by having the company incorporated in London and initially set up by foreigners, we strongly reduce the chances we will be harassed by Coalition forces and can call attention to the harassment of other publications. (Unfortunately, we're still subject to the same press prevention tactics as everyone else here.)

Hope this makes you feel a little bit better about reading us.