WORDS TO DIE FOR

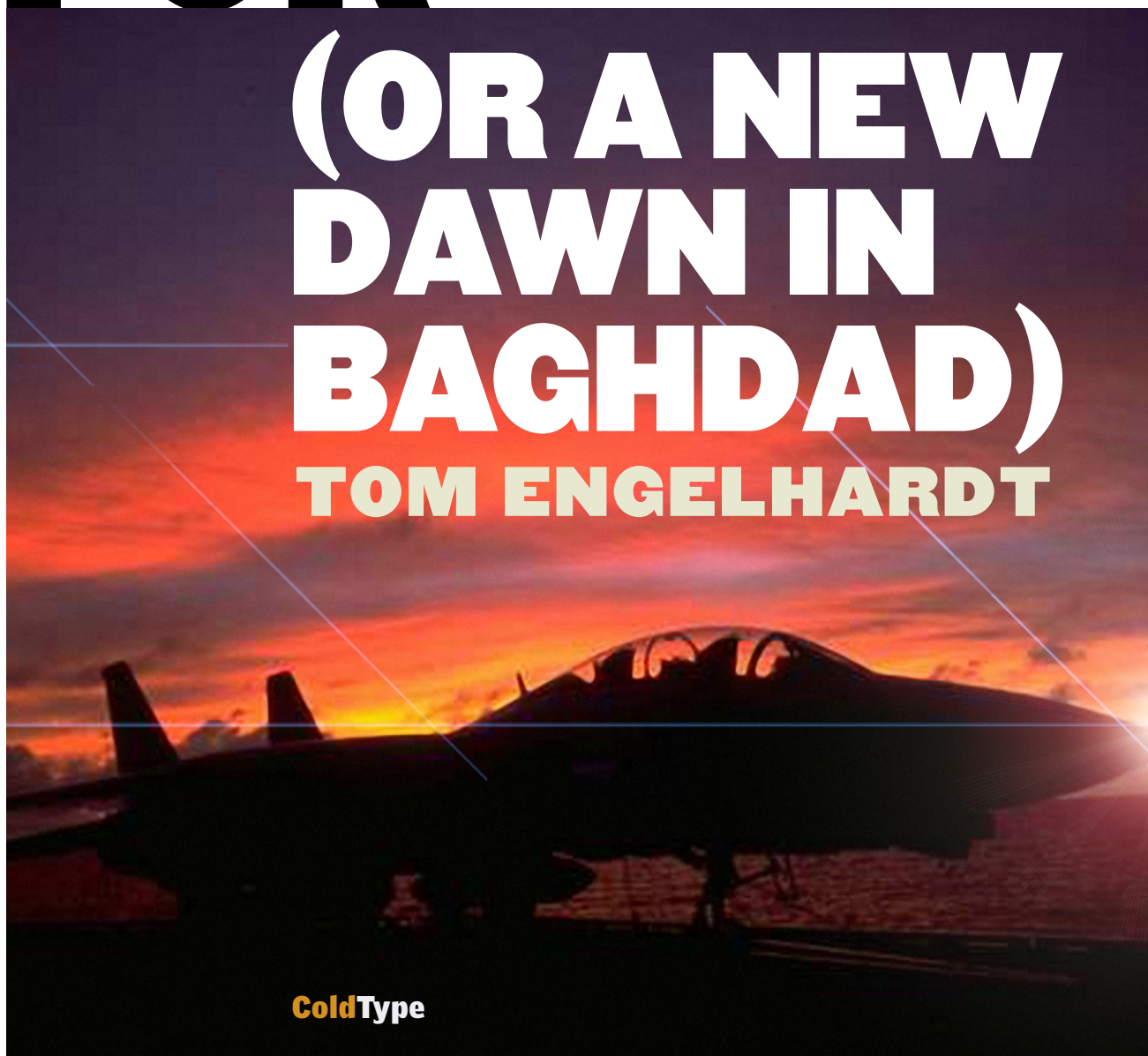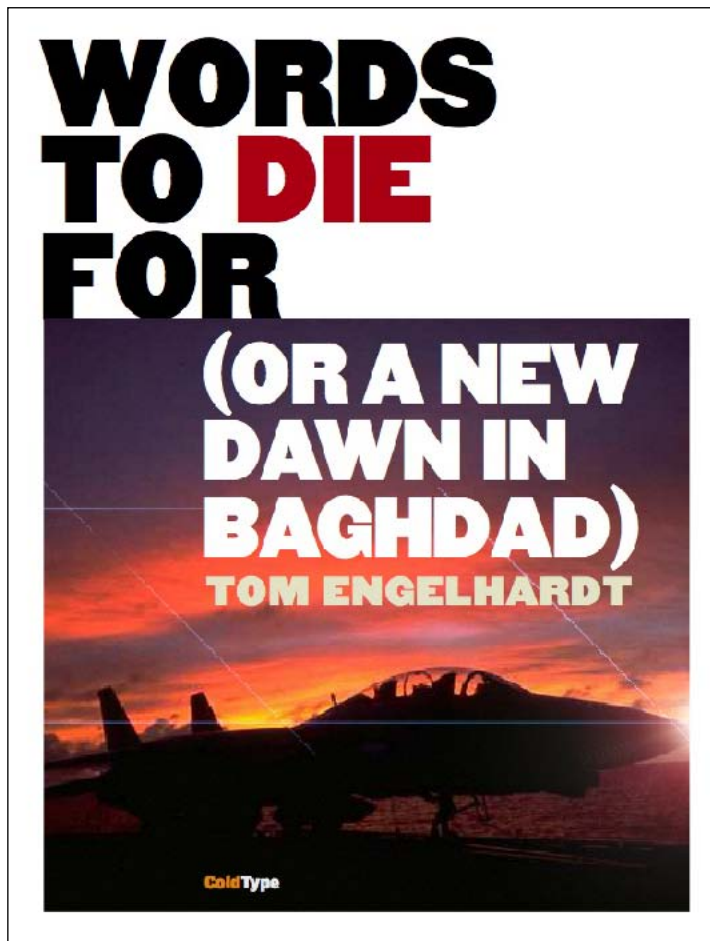## (OR A NEW DAWN IN BAGHDAD)

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ColdType

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ColdType

MY aunt Hilda, whose very name came from some other century, once told me her earliest memory: She was a little girl standing under a large tree in the backyard of her house in Brooklyn, New York, and she cried out for help. Her mother (my grandmother) Celia came out to ask what the matter was. An enormous spider was descending on her, she said, and she was scared. No, my grandmother told her gently, that's not a spider; that's just the tree's shadow. There's nothing to be scared of.

This memory came back to me the other day as I was thinking about the latest round of Bush administration and military commentary on Iraq. With a bow to my long-dead aunt, all you have to do is reverse her image to make sense of America's Iraq today: A giant spider is indeed descending, while top American officials do their best to insist that it's simply 120 degrees in the shade.

Like all wars, the "war in Iraq" or "Iraq war" – it's never gained the double caps of the Korean or Vietnam Wars – has also been a war of words. From "homeland" and "unlawful combatant" to "extraordinary rendition" and "Global War on Terror" (aka: World War IV or the Long War), never has an administration reached more often for its dictionaries to create pretzled words and phrases. Its war in Iraq has been no exception. But recently there's been a change, hardly noticed by anyone. The administration's familiar war vocabulary and imagery, which hung in there so remarkably long, has finally disappeared down the memory hole. So many images, tailored for home-front consumption, each meant to help give just a little more time to an increasingly embattled administration, have in recent months disappeared.

When was the last time you heard that the U.S. had "turned the corner" in Iraq? (Okay, Marine commandant Gen. James Conway did return from an early April visit to al-Anbar province, saying, "I think, in that area, we have turned the corner," but old habits do die hard.) Remember those "tipping points" and "turning points" we were always reaching (or reaching for) on our way to mission accomplished? All gone. Or what about those regularly spaced "landmarks" or "milestones" – the capture of Saddam, the "handing over of sovereignty" to the Iraqis, the "purple finger" election, the killing of Zarqawi – on our

path to success in Iraq? All missing in action.

In fact, how many times have you heard someone in this administration talk about "victory" in 2007? Our "victory" President, who in 2005 used the word 15 times (and "progress" 28) in a single speech introducing his long-forgotten National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, now speaks modestly of indeterminate hints of "success" or of "encouraging signs." Victory, when in administration speeches these days, often seems to have switched teams. Americans – Republican or administration ones anyway – may be "surging" in Baghdad, but not, according to most spokespeople, toward "victory." Our efforts of the moment are aimed at trying to staunch the flow of victory to our now omnipresent al-Qaedan opponents, who are being aided and abetted, of course, by the retreat-eager "Democrat" (or "cratic") Party.

George W. Bush, perhaps because the movie-style fantasy of being a victorious "commander-in-chief" was so much on his mind these last years, often admits to a familiarity with the psychology of victory, even when it has migrated elsewhere. As he told American Legion Post 177 the other week, "I also understand the mentality of an enemy that is trying to achieve a victory over us by causing us to lose our will." In a recent radio address to the nation, he insisted that congressional Democrats had "passed bills that would impose restrictions on our military commanders and set an arbitrary date for withdrawal from Iraq, giving our enemies the victory they desperately want... Congress must now work quickly and pass a clean bill that funds our troops, without artificial time lines for withdrawal, without handcuffing our generals on the ground..."

(That "handcuffing" image, by the way, has a fine presidential pedigree, even if given a new twist of the wrist by our we-don't-torture President. From Richard Nixon in the Vietnam era to George H. W. Bush at the time of the first Gulf War, American presidents regularly complained that the country was being forced to fight – or swore that it would not fight – "with one hand tied behind our back." As the first President Bush put it at the time of our first Gulf War, "No hands are going to be tied behind backs. This is not a Vietnam." Now, a "Democrat Congress," evidently even more infernal than the one Dick Cheney experienced in the early 1970s, is actually planning a double-wristed "handcuff" maneuver. If you're not a kickboxing champion, what a way to fight a war!)

Our geopolitically fundamentalist Vice President, who remains the President's pit bull when it comes to the shrinking Republican base, is perhaps the last priestly guardian of the old language of the Iraq war. As in a recent appearance on the Rush Limbaugh show, Dick ("last throes") Cheney now regularly fulminates against Democratic advocates of "withdrawal from Iraq" whose defeatist policies simply play "right into the hands of al Qaeda… [T]hey're betting… that they can break our will, that they can, in fact, force the American people to retreat, that we'll finally get tired of the battle and go home, and then they win."

Despite the specter of the terrorists taking full possession of victory, Cheney alone seems

not to have let winning loose from his grasp. "We will," he typically told the gathered grandees of the Heritage Foundation, "press on in this mission, and we will turn events towards victory."

Along with the brighter side of the administration's war in words, a darker, more fearful side, too, has fled the scene. In 2005-2006, as administration officials were coming up with one explanation after another for why a civil war visibly underway in Iraq actually wasn't, another set of images crept into officialese. Americans and Iraqis were, it was increasingly said, approaching (or prudently stepping back from) "the precipice"; they were at "the brink"; they were looking down into "the abyss"; they were dealing with a situation in which "Pandora's box" itself had been opened.

A year later, civil war is a given — even the Pentagon has acknowledged it. And yet, on the landscape of official imagery, there's hardly a lurid or crisis image in sight. That was, after all, so last year.

In fact, with rare exceptions, the language of Bush's Washington (and Baghdad) has been swept remarkably clean of the past — and, on the tabula rasa of no-image, in place of everything that once was there, a new set of words and images has been implanted. Consciously or not, these mine a deep strain in our national mythology: the belief in an all-American right to a second chance, to light out for the territories and start anew.

As a description of reality on the ground in a country wracked by mass killing, flight, destruction, civil war, religious strife, ethnic cleansing, vast flows of refugees, private militias, insurgents, terrorists, foreign jihadis, criminals, and kidnappers, this new language may be out to lunch, but in terms of its appeal on the "home front," it has in its cross hairs the deepest realms of the American character.

A New Dawn in Baghdad?

As this year began, the President was already touting the 2007 strategy model for Iraq, a "new plan to secure Baghdad." In his most recent radio address, he said, "The American people voted for change in Iraq [in November 2006], and that is exactly what our new commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, is working to achieve."

Over four years after the President officially launched the invasion of Iraq with a Disneyesque shock-and-awe spectacular over Baghdad, almost four years after he declared "major combat operations in Iraq have ended" against the backdrop of a banner that read "mission accomplished," all is again "new" in that country. If the pronouncements of his top military and civilian officials were to be believed, we are now at the dawn of a new military/political moment in Iraq, the kind of moment in which you just can't help using words like "first" and "early" and "beginning." It's so early, in fact, that no one can possibly

gauge whether the President's "new plan," now two months old on-the-ground, is working — and it will be many months more (for the fair-minded, anyway) before the rudiments of such an assessment can be hazarded.

After all, the full contingent of new "surge" combat troops won't even be in place until June. As Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, Commander of Multinational Corps-Iraq, has pointed out, even thinking about thinking about the new plan is going to be inappropriate for some time to come. "I plan," he said recently, "on making a first assessment probably some time in the summer, July or August time frame, where I'll give my recommendation to General Petraeus, and then he'll take a look at that and make his recommendation up the chain of command."

President Bush has made the same point this way: "[T]his operation is just getting started"; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice similarly pointed out that the surge was still only "at the beginning"; Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared this "early in the process," way too early, in fact, for any judgments. "Premature" was the word he used. "It's sort of like we keep pulling this tree up by the roots to see if it's growing... And, you know, I think General Petraeus has said the end of the summer"; General Petraeus, the much-lauded strategist running the counterinsurgency operation in Baghdad, helpfully pointed out that the operation is "still early days."

Senator John McCain, on returning from his stroll around that Baghdad market, pleaded for time for the — to pick up on Gates' image — sapling of strategy to grow. "It is my obligation," he told the assembled cadets of the Virginia Military Academy, "to encourage Americans to give it a chance to succeed."

This is a babe of a plan about which our top officials are being suitably cautious, as you would be with any creature that was just wobbling to its feet for the first time. However, they can't help but be optimistic. And so they are — from the President ("there are some encouraging signs… we're beginning to see some progress toward the mission") to the Vice-President ("We've got a new commander in the field… I think we are making progress") to that commander ("encouraging indicators") to his lieutenant Odierno ("steady progress is being made") to presidential hopeful McCain ("the first glimmers of progress under General Petraeus' political-military strategy… [are] cause for very cautious optimism"), and on down through the serried ranks.

Administration-backing pundits, themselves cautiously dipping toes in water, nonetheless agree on every count, touting cautious optimism and, like Senator McCain, pleading for Americans — and especially Democrats — to give war a chance. As David Brooks of the New York Times put the matter on the Lehrer News Hour: "[T]here's a lot more good news than a lot of us would have expected. And the fact is, this deserves a shot to play out over a few months, until August, and then we can, I think, make other decisions." Charles Krauthammer of the Washington Post, in a piece entitled "The Surge: First Fruits" offered this bit of upbeat

but cautious optimism: "The news from Anbar [Province] is the most promising." Like Brooks, he worries, however, that the child may be smothered in the crib by you-know-who: "How at this point – with only about half of the additional surge troops yet deployed – can Democrats be trying to force the United States to give up?"

And, talking about a tabula rasa world of war words, let's not forget "Plan B." The question arose early in 2007 of what – if the surge should somehow fail somewhere down the road – "Plan B" might be for the Bush administration. Of course, it's a passing advantage of the image itself that the President's surge strategy then becomes, by definition, Plan A. Those who bother to mention Plan A confirm this. In March, for instance, in a White House meeting with some state governors, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Peter Pace spoke to the question of Plan B. "Pace had a simple way of summarizing the administration's position, Gov. Phil Bredesen (D-Tenn.) recalled. 'Plan B was to make Plan A work.'" Ah! Brilliant. No wonder Secretary of State Rice concurred. In response to a challenge from Sen. John Kerry about what might happen if Prime Minister Maliki's government didn't live up to "the assurances they gave us," Rice replied: "I don't think you go to Plan B. You work with Plan A."

Republican Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, testing the presidential waters added this gem: "When people start asking what's plan B, let's go to plan A. Plan A let's win. Plan B, let's win. If we have to come up with another plan, let's win." While Senator McCain, in a front-page New York Times interview, simply threw his proverbial hands up and admitted: "I have no Plan B. If I saw that doomsday scenario evolving, then I would try to come up with one."

No one seemed to wonder if the American playbook, now over four years old, really only consisted of the first two letters in our alphabet; nor did anyone ask what, in fact, all those other confused plans the Bush administration put in place in Iraqi occupation years one through four were. Instead Plan B, like all those firsts and earlys, those uprooted saplings and encouraging initial steps offered an all-American composite image of starting over from scratch.

All of this, of course, is an extraordinary language in which to frame events in Iraq so many disastrous years after the invasion, with history's judgment already weighing so heavily on our President's plan to take down Saddam and recreate "the Greater Middle East" in an American image. All of this is no less extraordinary – verging on obscenity – as a collective description of a world of death, destruction, and mayhem in which, in a completely unremarkable Iraqi day in April the "early" tallies showed 6 GIs and 69 Iraqis killed and 39 wounded (and we're only talking about immediately reported bodies here); while on the previous day, 5 GIs, 2 Britons, and 109 Iraqis died (with 173 were wounded), and on the day before that, 164 Iraqis were killed, 345 injured, and 26 kidnapped. In terms only of the recorded dead of those three "normal" days of "stability and security" under the President's "surge"

plan, we're talking, in terms of the dead, about the equivalent of more than 12 Virginia-Tech-style massacres.

Americans, who notoriously don't put much faith in history, put a great deal of faith in newness. So the President's "surge" plan has been polished new as a gleaming apple. Forget that this isn't the first time American troops have "surged" into Baghdad and that just about every element of the plan is old as Methuselah – and has already failed in Iraq or somewhere else. Take, for instance, the decision to turn numerous neighborhoods in Baghdad into what are now being called (in another triumph of ludicrously upbeat naming), "gated communities." These will be patterned on "gated communities" previously tested out in the cities of Tal Afar and Falluja (with grim results). Those gatings had more of the Orwellian than Californian about them and were more like incarceration centers than Century Villages. Over-elaborate as they sound, these "gated communities" are undoubtedly doomed to fail. Not only did the French try something similar in Algeria, but we lived through the rural equivalent – "strategic hamlets" – in Vietnam and they were a disaster.

In the end, all of this is likely to prove but another linguistic strategy for buying time and the military men tasked with carrying the plan out surely know that. Lt. Gen. Odierno, for example, commented recently: "If we're able to create the security and stability within Iraq, that then buys the time"; while Gen. Petraeus put the matter vividly indeed:

 "…[T]he Washington clock is moving more rapidly than the Baghdad clock, so we're obviously trying to speed up the Baghdad clock a bit and to produce some progress on the ground that can perhaps give hope to those in the coalition countries, in Washington, and perhaps put a little more time on the Washington clock."

So think of the new Bush administration language of war as a kind of installment plan, a time-buying operation, a desperate attempt to wipe out a disastrous four years (as well as the results of the recent midterm elections and every opinion poll in sight). Don't think of it as a plan for victory, or even a plan for the security of the city-state of Baghdad. It is, in the end, an administration attempt, while the "clock" ticks less than encouragingly, to creep through at least to November 2008, or to Plan B or C or Z, anything that will keep defeat away from the door for a few months more.

Calling Names by Their Things in Iraq

Among the stranger aspects of the war is this: At least three foundational pieces of the American occupation of Iraq have essentially gone nameless. Yet, without them, the last years can make little sense. Amid the endless interviews, news conferences, press briefings, radio addresses, speeches, and talk radio and television interviews that come out of this administration in weekly, if not daily, surges – the tens upon tens of thousands of words that pour from Washington and the Green Zone of Baghdad – these three subjects remain large-

ly unmentioned, largely uncovered in a media that has relied so heavily on the administration's framing of the issues. Where there is no language, of course, things exist in consciousness in, at best, the most shadowy of forms, leaving Americans tongue-tied on matters of genuine import.

Here they are in brief order:

Air Power: Consider a recent exchange between a reporter and Secretary of Defense Gates

"Q Can you talk a little bit about the bombing today in Iraq?

"SEC. GATES: I don't know much more about it than you all do."

Even if you know nothing about the actual subject of this question, you should automatically know one thing: It wasn't about American air power. In fact, the reporter was bringing up the recent suicide bombing inside a cafeteria in the Iraqi parliament building. But in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there's a simple rule of these last years: They bomb, we don't. If you Google the words "bombing" and "Iraq," you'll see what I mean.

Air power has long been the American way of war. In fact, the use of air power with all its indiscriminate terror has, in the last year, ratcheted up strikingly in Afghanistan and may now be in the process of doing the same in Iraq. (It's hard to tell without the necessary reporting.) Journalists in Baghdad evidently do not look up – and military press briefers don't point to the skies. We have, in fact, been bombing and missiling in heavily populated urban areas of Iraq throughout the occupation years. But no descriptive language has been developed that would capture in any significant way the loosing of the U.S. Air Force on either country; and so, in a sense, the regular (if, in Iraq, still limited) use of air power has next to no reality for Americans, even though Iraq's skies are filled with attack helicopters, jets, and drones.

Permanent Bases: Every now and then some political figure mentions the possibility of, at some future moment, withdrawing American troops into the vast, multi-billion-dollar permanent bases that have been (and are still being) constructed in Iraq. Some of these are large enough to be small American towns (with their own multiple bus routes). Balad Air Base, for example, along with its 20,000 troops and its contractors, has air traffic that rivals Chicago's O'Hare Airport. At least four such mega-bases were planned before the invasion began. Early on, they were called "enduring camps" by the Pentagon, which had charm as well as a certain rudimentary accuracy. But over these years, the bases have rarely been mentioned by the administration and seldom attended to by the media. They remain a major fact-on-the-ground in Iraq – and in Bush administration plans for that country – but we have next to no real language for taking in their massive reality, so they remain a non-issue, nearly nonexistent in American debate about Iraq.

Most "withdrawal" plans now being offered by our Congressional representatives, for instance, only account for the withdrawal of "combat brigades," not troops guarding the

bases, which means, of course, that after most imagined "withdrawals," these vast bases are to remain well staffed. Little wonder Iraqis of just about every stripe are suspicious of us and our intentions in their country. And what descriptive language is there for what Washington Post on-line columnist William Arkin calls "a Pentagon-like military headquarters in the Green Zone" or the "largest Embassy in the universe," also being built in that massively fortified citadel in the heart of the Iraqi capital. When an embassy is to have a "staff" of many thousands, along with its own water and electricity systems, and its own anti-missile defenses, the very word "embassy" no longer has much meaning. We have no word for such a symbol of (attempted) permanent domination of a country and so, most of the time, nothing much is said.

Mercenaries: When the mainstream media speaks of the approximately 170,000 troops that will be in Iraq after the surge or "plus-up" is theoretically complete, they are perpetrating a fiction. As a start, just about no one counts the support troops in Kuwait, on ships off the coast, or in the region generally, which would certainly bring the figure up closer to 250,000. And it's rare to see anyone discussing the hordes of mercenaries, known politely as "private contractors," on the ground in Iraq working for rent-a-cop corporations. These range in numbers from the Pentagon's division-sized estimate of 20,000 up to 100,000, depending on how (and who) you decide to count. As part of the privatizing of the American military, they are undertaking various military and semi-military duties and have, as a group, recently been classified, according to Jeremy Scahill, as "an official part of the U.S. war machine."

They are a force (or a rabble) beyond control, beyond the law. (Not a single hired gun has yet been brought up on charges for any of their lawless acts in Iraq.) Their numbers, like their casualties, are essentially unknown; their tasks, largely unexplored; and, as "private contractor" indicates, there is no suitable descriptive language for them either. As a result, there is little way for Americans to grasp the essential lawlessness of the American occupation of Iraq, the real numbers involved in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or just how far our former citizen military has gone down the path to becoming a mercenary military.

With these key aspects of the invasion, occupation, and destruction of Iraq — for which language has failed us so badly — missing in action, much in the situation remains hidden, mysterious, even incomprehensible to us, though not necessarily to the Iraqis or, in many cases, to readers and viewers elsewhere on the planet.

A Devil's Dictionary of War in Iraq

The developing administration language for the President's surge plan in Baghdad (and al-Anbar Province) does several things. It manufactures "newness" from some of the older and less promising materials around; it creates a "new" plan out of ancient, failed strategies, not

to say, the thinnest of air. It also strips Iraq of some of its recent horrendous past, and us of our responsibility for it. In this case at least, that is what "starting over" really means.

This new, hopeful language offers one group – and only one – a "second" chance: the top officials of an administration that otherwise looked to be in its last throes. It has bought a little time for George Bush, while adding some new twisted definitions to an American Devil's Dictionary of War in Iraq, all the while carefully leaving blank pages where significant definitional chunks of reality should be.

But make no mistake, whatever words may be wielded, that "clock" of General Petraeus's is indeed ticking –loudly enough to be a bomb. Sooner or later, it will go off and whether it proves to be an alarm, waking Congress and the American people, or an explosion demolishing some aspect of our world remains unknown. In June or August or October, when horrific reality in Iraq outpaces whatever the Bush administration tries to call it, we may have our answer and perhaps then reality will name us.

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