

Flames engulf the symbols of power

Armed men were at the gates of Kindi hospital

Baghdad is burning. You could count 16 columns of smoke rising over the city yesterday afternoon. At the beginning, there was the Ministry of Trade. I watched the looters throw petrol through the smashed windows of the ground floor and the fire burst from them within two seconds.

Then there was a clutch of offices at the bottom of the Jumhuriyah Bridge, which emitted clouds of black, sulphurous smoke. By mid-afternoon, I was standing outside the Central Bank of Iraq as each window flamed like a candle, a mile-long curtain of ash and burning papers drifting over the Tigris.

As the pickings got smaller, the looters grew tired and – the history of Baghdad insists that anarchy takes this form – the symbols of government power were cremated. The Americans talked of a “new posture” but did nothing. They pushed armoured patrols through the east of the city, Abrams tanks and Humvees and Bradley fighting vehicles, but their soldiers did no more than wave at the arsonists. I found a woman weeping beside her husband in the old Arab market. “We are destroying what we now have for ourselves,” she said to him. “We are destroying our own future.”

The flames spread. By mid-afternoon, the al-Sadeer hotel was burning – the army of child thieves sent into the building had already stolen the bed-linen and the mattresses and the beds and tables and even the reception desk and its mass of iron keys. Then from the towering Ministry of Industry, came trails of black smoke. Every central street was strewn with papers, discarded furniture, stolen, wrecked cars and the contents of the small shops whose owners had not invested in armoured doors.

When I tried to reach the old Saddam hospital opposite the Ministry of Defence, American rifle-fire was hissing through the trees opposite the administrative block;

Robert Fisk » Flames engulf the symbols of power

they were, two nurses trying to flee the building said, shooting at any moving car because they believed Iraqi soldiers were hiding there. I saw none.

At last, the banks were looted. The Iraqi dinar has collapsed and no one had bothered to bash their way into the banks before.

But in the morning, I saw a mob storming the Rafidain Bank near the Baghdad governorate, dragging a massive iron safe to the door and crow-barring it open. Given the worth of the dinar, they would have done better to leave the cash inside and steal the safe.

And so it was by early evening that Baghdad was a place of gunfire as well as smoke. Stall-owners turned up with guns to protect their property because the Americans obviously declined to do so. Two looters were wounded.

Then mobs broke into the Kindi hospital. By the time I reached the compound – where only five days ago lives were being saved – armed men were at the gates. Most were in blue medical gowns, although they did not look to me to be doctors. They appeared to be Shia Muslims and this raised an immediate question. Was the Shia population of Baghdad trying – if only by protecting the institutions of the place – to take over from the Sunnis?

At the Kindi hospital, they ordered journalists away from the premises but, briefly obtaining access to the emergency ward, I found a Shia Muslim cleric inside, a man who had studied in southern Lebanon, lecturing the gunmen on the need to restore order in the city. Of course, that was the Americans' job. But they weren't doing it.

After the West German and Slovak embassies and the Unicef offices, it was the turn of the French cultural centre to be looted.

I briefly mentioned the extent of the anarchy to a US Marine officer who promised to tell his colonel about it. When I saw him later, he said he'd seen the colonel – but hadn't had time to mention the looting and burning.

Just a week ago, it was the Iraqi army's oil fires that covered the city in darkness. Now it is the newly "liberated" Iraqi people who are cloaking their city in ash. ♦