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At the end of May 2003, in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion, I found myself walking through the central government district of Baghdad. I had just left the old Republican Palace on the banks of the Tigris and was walking towards the center of the city to catch a ride. It was from the grand quarters of the Republican Palace that Saddam Hussein had ruled over Iraq. I had just spent the afternoon at the palace interviewing staff from the newly formed Coalition Provisional Authority; the hub of U.S. attempts to rebuild the Iraqi state after the invasion. In the late afternoon sunshine I struggled to understand how these American administrators were intending to reform the institutions of state they had so recently seized from the Baathist ruling elite.

As I walked passed the burnt-out hulks of government ministries, I came across small groups of American soldiers manning checkpoints in the security compound surrounding the palace. They had fought their way up from Kuwait in the expectation that they would be welcomed into Baghdad as liberators. They now found themselves the focus of increasing societal resentment, losing comrades every day to an enemy they were supposed to have defeated several weeks earlier.

The themes that dominated my impressions of that afternoon, the interviews in the opulent marble halls of the palace and the conversations with disorientated young GIs many miles from home, are those that have come to form the hub of my own research agenda as an academic: how society is understood, how people set about trying to create states, and how the states they build interact with society. I have sought answers to these questions by focusing on the birth and evolution of the postcolonial state in the international system, using Iraq as a prime example. All these questions appeared, on that afternoon, to be personified in the bewilderment, fear, and alienation of a group of young men, trying to impose order on a society they had little or no understanding of.

This book is an attempt to understand why the first attempt at regime change and state building in Iraq failed. It uses the tools of social theory and political sociology to interrogate the colonial archive, seeking to understand the perceptions and hence the agency of those British officials

who spent eighteen years trying to build a stable state in Iraq. Ultimately, it was their failures that brought war and foreign intervention back to Iraq in the first few years of the new millennium. If the United States can possibly avoid the misperceptions and mistakes of the state builders who went before them, the Iraqi people just might have a chance at getting the better life they so richly deserve.

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