

The Pocket Idiot's Guide to War-Profiteering in Iraq

Andrew Sola

University of Maryland University College Europe

(Contact: asola@faculty.ed.umuc.edu)

"The juncture between politics, business and fun is complete."

- Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

Abstract

This essay critically examines a recent publication in the Idiot's Guides Series: The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Surviving Iraq (2006). It applies Herbert Marcuse's critique of the language of capitalism in One-Dimensional Man (1964) to the current war in Iraq and to the cultural products that have arisen simultaneously with the war. Specifically, this essay critiques the style, grammar, word-choice and presentation of Surviving Iraq and illustrates how these communication techniques serve to both normalize the war in readers' minds and entrench the idea that the reader is able to and even ought to profit from the war. Following Marcuse, it concludes that the conjunction of the discourses of business, politics and fun in the text of Surviving Iraq both justifies a destructive political situation and encourages war-profiteering.

As I was strolling through the book store on a US military base in Germany, where I teach English and philosophy for an American university, my eye was arrested by the blue script on the spine of a slender orange volume, which read, "The Pocket Idiot's Guide™ to Surviving Iraq." Turning the book over, I read the back:

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO!

You're no idiot, of course. The prospect of heading into Iraq worries you - a lot. Safety is an issue, security is a huge problem, and you don't know a word of the language or the first thing about the culture. But duty or opportunity calls - and you have to listen...

Don't lose your nerve! Just pack *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Surviving Iraq* and you'll be ready for just about anything [...].

U.S.: \$9.95.

I'm no idiot, and I wasn't going to lose my nerve - or cut and run. Furthermore, even though I had (and have) no plans to go to Iraq, the book intrigued me. It was time for an impulse purchase. Only now do I realize that while the book insists I'm no idiot, possessing an *Idiot's Guide* and having ten fewer dollars in my pocket pretty much confirms that I am.

The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Surviving Iraq (2006) is yet another in the long and profitable line of *Books for Dummies*, *Complete Idiot's Guides*, and the even more cretinous *Pocket Idiot's Guides*. But this one is different. Instead of a hundred pages of large type, bad writing and even worse jokes devoted to, say, learning how to fix one's car or mastering Microsoft Excel, this book uses the same approach to teach one how not to get killed by a 'jihadist'. However, surviving Iraq is not the true purpose of the book, and it is not clear if even the author knows this, given that he seems to conceive of the war primarily as an opportunity to turn a profit. Instead of teaching the reader how to survive Iraq, the book teaches enterprising young Americans the ins and outs of war-profiteering. However, this term may never be used since it would call undue attention to the ugly underbelly of the US government's Iraq policy, specifically the contracting system, which drains billions of dollars from American taxpayers and deposits them in the accounts of defense corporations.

As the back cover says, the threats in Iraq are serious, but "duty or opportunity calls". The 'opportunity' here is a dead giveaway of the hidden aim of the book. Except for five short paragraphs about joining the military as a way of getting your foot in the door in Iraq (pp. 44-45), the idea of duty is completely abandoned.¹ This a book for opportunists, entrepreneurs, go-getters and adventurers (but most certainly not aspiring 'war-profiteers' - the euphemisms are less contentious than the taboo word).

Surviving Iraq is not, on the face of it, a problematic book. It is not a propaganda tract. The author, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter oft stationed in Iraq, is not a political ideologue. The publisher is not trying to sway public opinion following secret CIA directives. The *Idiot's Guides* series itself does nothing but provide information, as does this specific text. There is no conspiracy. Indeed, *Surviving Iraq* only provides information, seemingly neutral, easy-to-read, and fun-oriented information about how to get a high-paying job in Iraq, and then how to survive. However, its very existence illustrates how the cultural production of American capitalism seamlessly conjoins business, politics and fun. The language with which it expresses this conjunction must at the same time mask its hidden aim, for an acknowledgement that *Surviving Iraq* is actually a guide to war-profiteering would undermine its seemingly neutral ideological foundation. Still, writing about Iraq according to the criteria in the *Complete Idiot's* style guide² prevents both the writer and reader from seeking solutions to the problem in Iraq beyond any that have already been introduced into what Herbert Marcuse would call the established (and repressive) universe of ordinary discourse.³

In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse discusses the process whereby language becomes a repressive tool that validates a repressive and potentially irrational reality. At first, language merely describes - neutrally describes - what is happening in the world. However, Marcuse argues that by repeating the same words that everyone else uses, by using the same syntax that everyone else uses and by referring to the same ideas to which everyone else refers - in short, by speaking and being understood by everyone else - we are taking part in a "comprehensive, omnipresent realm of meaning which has been developed, and ordinarily 'closed,' by the social system within which and from which the communication takes place" (1964, p. 197). In this closed universe of discourse, only ideas accepted and repeated by the whole have merit. Ideas and language that are not readily understood by the whole and that might contradict the whole are, therefore, rejected. Language itself becomes a tool of domination.

Marcuse takes this idea even further. The uncritical acceptance of our everyday language serves to reinforce a reality that is often irrational, and the behavior that accompanies this language is also irrational. Marcuse's most extreme example of this process is the science that accompanied the specter of mutual annihilation:

The scientific approach to the vexing problem of mutual annihilation - the mathematics and calculations of kill and over-kill, the measurement of spreading or not-quite-so-spreading fallout, the experiments of endurance in abnormal situations - is mystifying to the extent to which it promotes (and even demands) behavior which accepts the insanity. It thus counteracts a truly rational behavior - namely, the refusal to go along, and the effort to do away with the conditions which produce the insanity. (1964, p. 190)

A cycle is established in which thought, speech and "pragmatic," "scientific" behavior mutually reinforce an irrational reality. And it is only a matter of time before the repetition of these ideas (and the repetition of the language that expresses these ideas) entrenches both the irrational ideas and the irrational language in the mind. Eventually, irrationality becomes perfectly rational.

It is not only in scientific study that an irrational reality is validated. The presence of a dangerous and irrational political situation swiftly becomes a sellable product in capitalist culture. Hence, books like *Surviving Iraq* appear. *Surviving Iraq*, while it does not overtly support the war, is part of a cultural apparatus that normalizes reactions to destructive, costly, inhumane, and potentially irrational political situations. The text of *Surviving Iraq* only provides information, and one might think that a merely informative text must be ideologically neutral, like a science textbook. Herbert Marcuse provides an example of how the commercial process of providing products or selling information is far from ideologically

neutral. In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse speaks of “the smooth linguistic conjunction of conflicting parts of speech” which makes “utterly surrealistic” advertisements perfectly normal:

Advertisements such as a “Luxury Fall-Out Shelter” [...] may still evoke the naive reaction [...] that no logic and no language should be capable of correctly joining luxury and fall-out. However, the logic and the language become perfectly rational when we learn [...] that “carpeting, scrabble and TV” are provided in the \$1,000 model of the shelter. The validation is not primarily in the fact that this language sells (it seems that the fall-out business was not so good) but rather that it promotes the immediate identification of the particular with the general interest [...], prosperity with the annihilation potential. (p. 90)

Just as the proliferation of apocalypse survival products accompanied the threat of total annihilation, so books like *Surviving Iraq* accompany the existence of a catastrophic but profitable war in the Middle East.

“Surviving” and “Iraq”; “Luxury” and “Fall-out”: how does the conjoining of these terms confine one’s thought of the political situations about which they speak? In the words “Surviving” and “Iraq,” the author expresses the fact that Iraq is a dangerous place. Indeed, no other title would be appropriate for such a book - Iraq is a dangerous place, and *Enjoying Iraq* would be a ridiculous title. *Surviving Iraq* simply repeats the fact that Iraq is a place where the threats of death and kidnapping will hang over you. The problem that the book purports to solve is how to survive these threats. But what is lost in the smooth linguistic conjunction of these terms? Any thought of *why* Iraq is a deadly place. The same is true of the Luxury Fall-Out shelter, which seamlessly expresses the surreal political situation of the time and also provides a ‘pragmatic’ means of riding out the apocalypse while watching reruns of the Simpsons (the rational question is this: why should we submit to governments that have planned for our annihilation?). The same was true of the scientific experiments on kill and over-kill during the Cold War. Pragmatism supercedes irrationality. Refusal to take part in the insanity is no longer an option. The rationalization of the process of surviving Iraq conceals the irrationality of the whole undertaking.

Again, the argument is not that these are bad products, or that the advertising is false, but that the imperative of capitalist consumer culture is not so much to make the world a better, saner place (say, by disarming all nuclear weapons or by creating a world that would not require survival guides) but to ‘pragmatically’ derive profit from a world in which people are miserable. To think that the *Pocket Idiot’s Guide to Surviving Iraq* is merely an informative, ideology-free text misses the point. As Marcuse argues, “Language [...] becomes itself an

instrument of control even where it does not transmit orders but information" (1964, p. 103). *Surviving Iraq's* anodyne and unproblematic existence as a product turns the consumer's focus away from the surreal situation in Iraq.⁴ The book is yet another cultural product that, in tandem with real policy, normalize our conception of the war. And *Surviving Iraq* is not even worthy of criticism in and of itself. However, it is part of a chain of cultural and economic institutions, a part of a vast cultural and ideological apparatus, and each part of that apparatus (from video games set in Iraq, to TV shows like *24*, to desert-camouflaged G.I. Joes) both normalize a destructive political situation and constrict the universe of discourse surrounding it.

More importantly, not only does *Surviving Iraq* turn away the consumer's focus from the violence in Iraq, but it also identifies the war with one's own particular interest in profit. In the lengthy Marcuse passage above, one important function of the 'smooth linguistic conjunction' is that it identifies the particular with the general interest. It might be in the general interest of Americans and Iraqis to install a government that is friendly to the West in Baghdad and even to provide the Iraqi people with a liberal constitution that protects individual rights. The particular business interest must be aligned with the general interest. In *Surviving Iraq*, the author is careful to tell the reader just how important Iraq is to Americans. In Chapter 1, we learn that Iraq's borders "now enclose the world's *fourth largest oil reserves*. What happens here eventually affects pocketbooks at the world's gas pumps" (p. 3). In other words, Iraq is important to you, reader, because it affects *your* pocketbook. In Chapter 3, we learn the amount of money given to contractors between 2002 and 2004: \$37.4 billion (p. 43). Furthermore, we learn that there are at least 100,000 contractors in Iraq and that the salary for contractors is between \$60,000 and \$175,000 (p. 42).⁵ Without meaning to do so, this information confirms to the reader that his own particular interest is doubly at stake in Iraq. Not only does oil flow freely, but US tax-payers' dollars as well.

Once the average-income reader begins to realize the potential for huge financial gain, the smooth conjunction between the general and particular interest is complete, and the threats to survival seem to be mere stumbling blocks to financial security and well-being. There are no other concerns.

With the creation of the luxury fallout shelter, Marcuse says that "the juncture of business, politics and fun is complete" (1964, p. 104). No less is the case with *Pocket Idiot's Guide to Surviving Iraq*. Business and politics are the most obvious elements of the book, but how is reading about avoiding one's own decapitation fun? Buying products that are not fun to consume is not what business is about. Even commercials for roto-rooters and forever-sharp knives express that these excellent products are fun to use. So what makes reading about one's impending death fun?

One reason that the *Idiot's Guides* sell so well is because they are fun to read, unlike the technical manuals that come with products, which are supposed to tell us how to use them. They eschew complexity in visual presentation, in word-choice and in the development of content. And so, each *Idiot's Guide* comes with its own fun-filled extras - bubble captions with text that explain an interesting fact - in order to maintain our short attention spans. *Surviving Iraq* has four types of these "extras": "Come, Again," which explains difficult terms that the reader might not understand, like 'Mesopotamia' (p. 4) and 'caliphate' (p. 7); "This Just In," which provides up-to-date 'intel,' like the fact that Iraqis are tribal by nature, but that there are "forward-looking sheikhs" who want to be part of a democratic government (p. 10); "Red Alert" which cautions the reader about security risks: "On Nov. 18, 2005, a twin suicide bombing targeted the Hamra Hotel [...]" (p. 70); and "You Don't Say," which features factoids and quotations, such as Iraq has 115 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (p. 3) and "You know, the country is basically peaceful" - CPA chief Paul Bremer" (p. 21). Not only does *Surviving Iraq* provide these fun rest-stops in your quest for information on not getting killed, but each chapter ends with a bullet-pointed "Least you should know" section, which even further reduces the time you must spend in learning about your imminent execution.

In addition to the fun visual presentation and the simplified grammar and style, *Surviving Iraq* avoids all complex (read: unnecessary) historical content. Chapter 1, entitled "Iraq 101 - 7,000 Years in 7 Minutes," does precisely that: simplifies the complex history of the region into manageable and idiotic catch phrases. We learn in Chapter 1 the only important history of Iraq is its economic and colonial history. It begins: "Iraq puts the 'middle' in Middle East and the 'hot' in hot spot" (p. 2). From here on, we learn that people have only ever prized Iraq for its economic value, at first because it was fertile land due to its proximity to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers: "Whereas the rivers are the source of life and the original attraction, recent Western powers have been interested in Iraq for other reasons - first as a transit point to valuable colonies in the Far East, and later as a source of oil" (p. 3). From the start, then, Iraq has only been valuable because of its potential for exploitation by foreign powers. However, exploitation is a taboo word. "Attraction" and "interest" are preferred because they are words that indicate benign concern rather than blatant exploitation. The unspoken message is that America is acting in a completely reasonable way; America is even following historical precedent.

Other bite-sized sections of the opening chapter have fun titles as well, such as the five paragraph "Iraq Takes a Baath" section, in which we learn about Saddam Hussein and his fondness for the film *The Godfather*, "because he admires the fictional mob boss Don Corleone" (p. 15). A chart entitled "I Am the Boss of You" details the different foreign empires who have dominated Iraq and the results of that domination. The Sumerian presence (3,000-

2,000 BCE) led to the introduction of the wheel, the plow, writing and legal codes; the Arab presence (638-1100 CE) led to the introduction of universities, teaching hospitals, modern numbers, algebra and the concept of zero; and the American presence (2003-) introduced “representative government” and a “thriving insurgency” (pp. 12-13).

As the seven-minute history nears its conclusion, various statements hint at the complexity of the political situation in Iraq, but these nods to complexity are instantly left to the side. For example, the section “Who’s in Charge” tells us that there have been “three governments, two constitutions, and several plans to rebuild the country and its security apparatus” (pp. 17-18). However, the Iraqis are not really in control. “Since possession is 90 percent of ownership, the militaries of the United States, Great Britain, and other coalition countries have found themselves saddled with the responsibility of overseeing the country [...]” (p. 18). Apparently, the coalition would rather leave and allow Iraq to take care of itself, but the Iraqis are incapable of that, mostly due to the ethnic and religious divisions between the Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites. We are then given the hint of complexity: “And, by the way, only the Kurdish and Shiite regions have proven oil reserves” (p. 18). The paragraph ends with this aside and we are moved immediately to the next section on the “alphabet soup of Iraqi governance” (p. 18).

The brief note about where the oil is confirms to the reader the real origins of conflict in Iraq: oil. The Iraqis themselves are fighting over their own oil, so if America is fighting for it too, America is just following a ‘natural’ historical precedent. Business and politics are once again joined in this statement, but where’s the fun? The aside - “and, by the way,” the author says with a smirk and wink - invites the reader into the little secret about America’s adventure in Iraq. There’s lots of oil there, in case you’ve forgotten, which means lots of money for you too.

The final way in which business, politics and fun are joined in *Surviving Iraq* is the risk-management discourse, the discourse of costs and benefits, profit margins and risk thresholds, investment capital and projected returns. Playing the stock market is the peak of the juncture between business and fun. Indeed, Americans ‘play’ the stock market as we might our other favorite national pastime. When selling the prospect of working in Iraq, then, it is only natural to speak of the undertaking in this discursive mode. *Surviving Iraq* obliges by showing the reader how to manage the “risk landscape” all the while reminding the reader that “the money and benefits are often as good as you’ve heard” (p. 48). In fact, the book is most in-depth in its treatment of the risk landscape. It even has a chart devoted to civilian contractor deaths by city and region (98 in Baghdad and nearby towns, 29 in Mosul, 16 in Fallujah and Ramadi, etc.); another paragraph devoted to contractors killed and method of death (57 in their cars or convoys after assaults, 45 from gunfire or RPGs; 33 from roadside

bombs; 30 from kidnappings and subsequent execution, etc.); a “You Don’t Say” box devoted to contractor deaths by company (27 from KBR, 18 from Blackwater Security, 13 from DynCorp, etc.) and a sentence devoted to contractors killed by nationality (95 Americans, 31 British and 29 Turks). At the end of this section, the author concludes that “if you’re an American, and KBR offers you a job doing convoy security around Baghdad...just keep the risks in mind” (pp. 32-33). This analysis is conducted like a baseball manager choosing to pinch-hit a righty or a lefty in the ninth inning with bases loaded, or better yet like an amateur investor deciding if buying Apple stocks would be a good long-term investment strategy. The reader is encouraged to think of working in Iraq within the high-risk/high-reward construction, and that’s all the fun.

Again, the statistical analysis is logical, the research thorough, the chain of reasoning solid, and the conclusion well-grounded. Essentially, there is nothing amiss. However, the presentation, which conjoins business, politics and fun, also conjoins the particular and general interest and prevents the development of meaningful social, cultural, historical and economic content. Even worse, it positively encourages the reader to participate in war-profiteering.

Through the first one hundred pages, there is little information about actually surviving Iraq because the idea of profiting from Iraq holds precedent. However, the seventh of the ten chapters, “Saving Your Own Life”, actually discusses the content that the title of the book heralds. For example, it describes the sounds of incoming fire: “Bullets aimed at you make a crackling noise in the air as they pass, a thick *smack* noise as they hit a nearby wall or armor, or else that Hollywood *pchoing!* ricochet noise as they bounce off things nearby” (p.117). Chapter 7 also provides both good and bad options for taking cover: “The best options (in order) are stacked sandbags, heavy stones, a concrete wall, bricks, and then cinderblocks” (p.118). We are then told that cars are not so great: “If you have to cower behind a car, cower behind the wheels and not the hollow doors. Brake drums are your friend! And don’t pick the car rigged to explode - it’s the one that’s empty but riding mysteriously low, because the trunk or engine block is probably full of artillery shells” (p.118). The author even devotes a few pages to first aid - “stem the arterial bleeding first!” (p.106). Still, in a book called *Surviving Iraq*, one might have expected more detail on the survival and less on the profit and the fun.

It is telling that this chapter begins with the disclaimer, “No book can teach you what you need to know to travel safely in Iraq” (p. 99), and ends with the command, “You should take a hostile environment course before traveling to Iraq” (p. 119). If the book insists that it cannot teach readers how to survive Iraq, even though that is what the title claims it will do, then the title must be a lie. There must be another lesson the book teaches, a lesson that

could be expressed by another, more accurate title: *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to War-Profitteering in Iraq*.

In the subsequent chapter, "Getting around in Iraq," the author attempts to maintain the illusion that the book is really a survival guide by discussing the political situation and risk landscape in the various regions of Iraq. For example, we learn that the Sunni Triangle and the Triangle of Death are different triangles (p. 124). However, the slippage between politics and fun is nearly instantaneous; the next chapter, which is the penultimate, is called "Enjoying Yourself" and discusses museum visits and the nightlife in Baghdad. At this point, it is unclear if the book is a profit guide, a survival guide or a tourist guide.

The final chapter is called "Hotel California." After discussing the practicalities of leaving Iraq, the author discusses "What You'll Suddenly Notice in the Real World" (p. 156). You will discover section headings that read, "You Are a Basket Case" and "Things Ain't Normal" (p. 157). So, "What's Wrong with You" (p. 158)? What's wrong is that "You're Stressing, Dude" (p. 158). What he means is that you might be suffering from PTSD. Statistics are provided, of course. A military study reports that 12.5 percent of troops who served in Iraq reported symptoms of PTSD and 16 percent reported symptoms of major depression, anxiety or PTSD. Then we learn that the general population in America has a 5 percent rate of such symptoms (pp. 159-160). Summing up, the author does the math for us (after all, this is an *Idiot's Guide*): "You can expect to *triple* the likelihood of becoming a basket case [after working in Iraq]" (p. 160). Of course, we must be reassured, and so we are when we are told that "all these feelings are normal" (p. 160). A page and a half on PTSD help-lines and resources follow, and the book concludes with its final "Least You Should Know" Section, in which the last bullet-pointed phrase reads: "If you are careful, physically and mentally, your Iraq experience will be fulfilling" (p. 162).

We are left on a high-note, and the circle is complete. We have gone from 'duty or opportunity' calling us to Iraq; through the history, economics and politics of Iraq; to the financial rewards and the threats of working there; and finally we end with personal fulfillment - and all in 162 small-page, large-print, margin-heavy, informative, and (most importantly) fun-filled pages. Surviving Iraq does not seem so difficult after all. All that was needed was an *Idiot's Guide*.

But there is more I want to know. I heard on the news today that the Iraqi civilian death toll is mounting, and it seems to be a serious problem, so I check the index for torture, execution or murder of Iraqi civilians. Nothing. What about Iraqi civilian deaths? I find "civilian party hosts," which is in a chapter section entitled "Party On." I must have been an idiot to expect any reference to how the war has affected actual Iraqis. In order for a war-profiteer to survive Iraq, information about how Iraqis are affected by the war is unnecessary. At least the

civilian party host section tells me how to organize my security if I'm having a boozy blowout in Baghdad (no Iraqis invited). I realize that my true interest in Iraq is partying and profiting, all the while avoiding getting killed.

Marcuse says in his *Essay on Liberation* (1969: 8) that the "obscene is not the picture of a naked woman who exposes her pubic hair but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals rewarded in a war of aggression." *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Surviving Iraq* is no less obscene. Its very existence is the mark of its inhumanity, its selfishness and its ignorance. It is truly an "easy to understand", "practical" and "straightforward" guide to the poverty of America's thought, the duplicity of its language and the shallowness of its morality.

Notes

1. Perhaps the author is aware that the military actually provides a substantial course in surviving Iraq to soldiers before they deploy (Europe-based soldiers do much of their pre-deployment training at a massive live-fire training complex in Bavaria). However, having a reference to the military on the back cover adds to the book's marketability.
2. See the following URL for the style guide: <www.idiotsguides.com/static/cs/us/603/guidelines.html>. There the aspiring *Idiot's Guide* author will learn how to address the audience, how to crack jokes, and how to maintain an informal tone.
3. See, for example, Chapter 7, "The Triumph of Positive Thinking: One-Dimensional Philosophy", in *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse suggests that thinkers must perform critiques of ordinary language, must show "the grounds which made discourse a mutilated and deceptive universe. [...] Such [an analysis] would involve analyzing ordinary language in really controversial areas, recognizing muddled thinking where it *seems* to be the least muddled, uncovering the falsehood in so much normal and clear usage. Then linguistic analysis would attain the level on which the specific societal processes which shape and limit the universe of discourse become visible and understandable" (195). Such an analysis is hopefully what is performed in this essay.
4. At time of writing, the bodies of 180 people, who had been tortured before their executions, have been found over the course of four days in Baghdad - September 13-16, 2006.
5. My students, who are US soldiers that have been deployed to Iraq at least once, say that contractors actually earn between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per month, which is why many of them leave the army to become security contractors

References

Janega, J., 2006. *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Surviving Iraq*. New York: Alpha Books.

Marcuse, H., 1964. *One-Dimensional Man*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

---1969. *An Essay on Liberation*. USA: Beacon Press.