

# The Price is Right

Bomb-resistant trashcans, cultural diversity training, and other tools to rebuild Iraq.

By Jai Singh

At first glance, the war profiteers looked more like Rotarians. When I walked into the Sheraton National Hotel, just a stone's throw from the Pentagon, the posh lobby was packed with dozens of nondescript, amiable, middle-aged men, most of them slapping someone on the back, exchanging business cards, or chatting enthusiastically on a cell phone. "Look, just ask them to tell us what they're lookin' to pay," one business-suited man barked into his phone. Another man with a Southern accent, talked about a client, potential partner, or hire. "I wanna say he went to Chile, but it might have been one of those other countries." Another guy, lounging near the bar, recalled the hotel before its recent multi-million dollar renovation. If he knew it had improved so much, he told me, he would have brought the kids.

Like me, they were here to attend a 2-day conference on "Rebuilding Iraq." In the months since Congress allocated more than \$18 billion in U.S. taxpayer dollars for reconstruction projects in the newly-liberated country, the Baghdad-based Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) has been taking bids on everything from mobile hydraulic cranes to amberlite resins to Iraqi army uniforms. The conference organizers, New Fields Exhibitions, Inc., had promised a "one-stop-shop for success in Iraq." And if the scene in the lobby didn't exactly conjure up images of instability and violence, the products being pitched certainly did.

One stack of brochures on the registration table advertised bomb-

resistant trashcans, each available in colors ranging from windswept copper to lapis blue, and capable of containing the explosion of a pipe bomb. (I had already missed the demonstration, held one day earlier). Another company specialized in refitting sport utility vehicles with armor plate and bulletproof glass, making them invulnerable to small arms fire. The Overseas Private Investment Corporation had set out information packets about its political insurance policies, aimed at those firms worried about having their assets expropriated by the future Iraqi government. The delivery-services company DHL, a major sponsor of "Rebuilding Iraq," didn't have much traffic at their table. I asked their representative about the DHL plane that got shot down just a few weeks prior to the conference. "It was an old plane anyway," he said.

The vicissitudes of federal government contracting, it turns out, apply beyond U.S. borders. One entrepreneur, a burly fellow named Richard, explained with a Southern twang that his business—which provides support staff for the CPA—gets preferential treatment because he's part Cherokee. After some small talk, I got ready to leave. "You going back?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I've got a 5 o'clock meeting."

Surveying my dark skin once again, he said. "No, I mean to Baghdad." I'm not Iraqi, I explained. I'm Indian American. "Oh, I got a bunch of Indians working for me in Qatar. I'll tell ya a funny story. I was over

there and somebody called up the office over there asking if we were an Indian company. My guy over there said 'what kind? Dot heads or feathers?'" I mustered a weak chuckle to match his guffaws.

Another panel I attended that day was titled "Cultural strategies for rebuilding Iraq." The star attraction—and the guy I came to see—was Col. Matthew Bogdanos, a Marine reservist. Bogdanos wasn't there to sell something, but to tell a story. As a New York City assistant district attorney, he had taken on P. Diddy; on active duty, he had taken on Saddam Hussein. When the Iraqi National Museum was looted, Gen. Tommy Franks assigned Bogdanos, then deployed in southern Iraq, to head the antiquities recovery and investigation team. Bogdanos, a Greek American with a master's degree in classical studies, was a perfect fit.

When he arrived in Baghdad, the graffiti scrawled on museum's front door was not exactly welcoming: "Death to all Americans and Zionist pigs." But by embracing local customs he and colleagues won the trust of locals. They worked without helmets, like civilians, and lived inside the Museum so informants could come by at any time. The team made remarkable progress, recovering hundreds of priceless pieces and discovering many artifacts were not looted, but stowed away elsewhere. About 8,500 pieces were still missing, "but don't forget," he reminded the audience, "a necklace with 16 beads counts as 17 pieces." Dealing with informants in Iraq was a lot like being a cop in New York or DC, Bogdanos said. They can have ulterior motives for providing information and may have gang affiliations. "But chances are, you're not going to be led into an ambush on 125th and Amsterdam."

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# WHO'S WHO

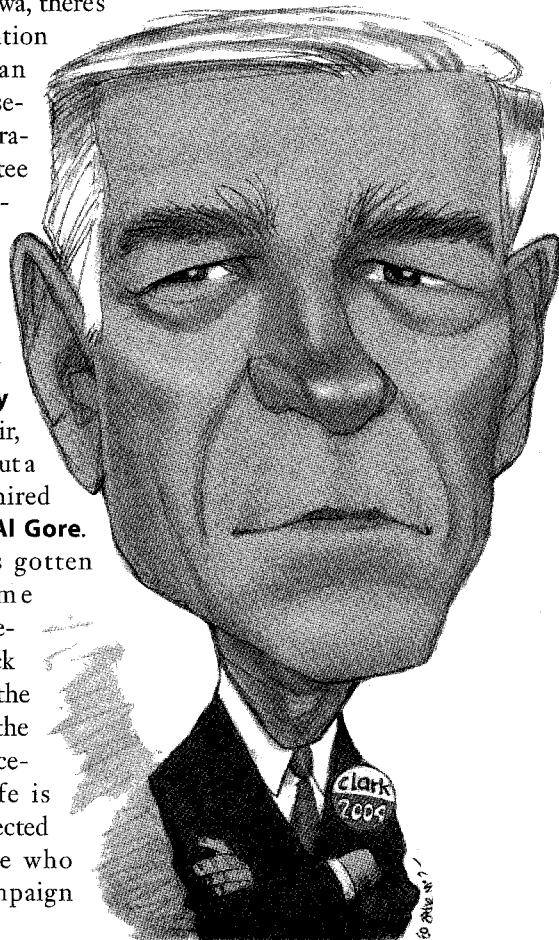
**G**eorge W. Bush and his top envoy in Iraq, **L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer** have become fast friends over the past few months—so much so that many in Foggy Bottom speculate that Bremer will replace Secretary of State **Colin Powell** if Bush wins a second term. *The Washington Post* reported recently that the two had a “double-date” dinner with their wives early in the fall and have worked out together in the White House gym. What the two couples may share most in common, however, are strong religious convictions. Bremer converted to Catholicism as an adult and his wife, Frances, is a prayer volunteer with [www.dailyguideposts.com](http://www.dailyguideposts.com), a website that connects the prayer requests of complete strangers with volunteers who agree to pray for their concerns. In addition, the Bremers own a house in Lourdes, a town in France famous as the site of St. Bernadette’s vision of the Virgin Mary and a pilgrimage destination for Catholics. The Bremers collect holy water from the site and Frances tells friends that the water has reportedly healed a cancer-stricken friend of the family as well as their ailing cat.

If Bremer doesn’t succeed Powell, then who will? Syndicated columnist **Robert Novak** suggested recently that it would be Sen. **Richard Lugar** (R-Ind.), cur-

rently chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Like Powell, Lugar hails from the GOP’s moderate wing on foreign policy, and his appointment would be a defeat for administration hawks, who expected that one of their own would be taking the top slot at Foggy Bottom. Speculation had centered on **Paul Wolfowitz**, the neoconservative intellectual currently serving as deputy secretary of Defense. But Novak reports that Wolfowitz is “reported to have lost favor at the White House”—perhaps because of his poor planning for postwar Iraq, the consequences of which may now threaten Bush’s reelection.

**B**efore even the first caucuses are held in Iowa, there’s already speculation about whether Dean would engineer a housecleaning at the Democratic National Committee should he win the nomination and, perhaps, the presidency. It was only a few years ago, after all, that **Bill Clinton** and other party leaders installed **Terry McAuliffe** as DNC chair, in the process forcing out a number of recently-hired staffers with ties to **Al Gore**. Now that Gore has gotten behind Dean, some Democratic insiders predict it would be payback time should Dean win the nomination. Topping the list of potential replacements for McAuliffe is **Donna Brazile**, a respected grassroots operative who served as Gore’s campaign manager in 2000.

If the press has already anointed Dean the presumptive nominee, rival candidate **Wesley Clark** doesn’t seem to be taking notice. During a recent campaign stop in New York City, Clark met with New York State attorney general **Eliot Spitzer**, whom the General is reportedly considering as a running mate. Spitzer has garnered headlines for his pursuit of pharmaceutical companies, gun manufacturers, polluters, and—most famously—white-collar criminals on Wall Street, taking on the powerful investment firm Merrill Lynch. Spitzer’s aggressive tough-on-crime style that has earned him the nickname “The Enforcer,” as well as his New York background, would balance nicely with Clark’s foreign-policy background and Southern roots.



Art by Chris Ware



# Mirth of a Nation

How Bill Clinton learned to tell jokes on himself—and get the last laugh.



Getty Images

By Mark Katz

**H**e opened the door and I jumped to my feet. Watching the president of the United States enter the room is always a startling sight. Of course, the sight he encountered might have caught him off-guard too: a nervous guy in a tuxedo secluded in a dimly-lit holding room with a stack of pages in one hand and an egg timer in the other. Although this was the fifth humor speech I had prepared for President Bill Clinton since he'd taken office, we were about to have our very first one-on-one meeting. The occasion was the remarks he was about to give to the Alfalfa Club, the least known of the four annual Washington humor dinners that take place from January through April—collectively known as the “Silly Season.” And on this snowy night in January of 1995, I was there to fulfill the duties of what was probably the oddest job description in town: a presidential joke writer, an adjunct member of the White House speechwriting staff on retainer by way of the Democratic National Committee.

**Mark Katz** is a former humor speechwriter for President Bill Clinton. From the book *Clinton and Me* by Mark Katz, to be published by Miramax Books in Feb. 2004. Copyright 2004 Mark Katz. All rights reserved. [www.clintonandme.com](http://www.clintonandme.com)