Good afternoon, everyone. Special greetings to the members of the Ellis family who’ve come here today.

I am very honoured to be here at the Centre for Military and Strategic studies. I want to thank Professor Bercuson for inviting me at such an extraordinary moment in history. Like you, I have been riveted by the recent scenes from Iraq, where had the chance to spend some time last fall. I assigned myself to go there, because I realized I couldn’t in all honesty write another word about the place until I saw for myself. That certainly doesn’t make me an expert. But I’ve noticed there are an awful lot of armchair pundits on this subject. And up close and on the ground, the first thing you learn is humility.

This is not a simple story. And you are only going to see a sliver of it on TV. I’m going to tell you about some of the things you don’t see on TV.

Visiting Iraq changed my mind. It made me more pessimistic. I came away concluding that it would probably turn out badly for the Americans. This doesn’t mean it will turn out badly for the Iraqis. Those are two different things. Anyway, it’s a fascinating place, and I’d like to spend a lot more time there. This unfortunately will be hard – not because of the violence, which is reasonably easy to avoid, but because of the insurance, which
costs around $800 a day. That explains why there aren’t that many Canadian reporters there these days.

Reading about Ross Ellis, in whose honour I’ve been invited here today, I was struck by how distant his world is from ours – not in years, but in attitudes. People looked up to soldiers then. And boys became men much faster. I’m sure the Depression had a lot to do with it. Ross Ellis joined the Militia as a trooper in the Light Alberta Horse when he was still in high school. He made sergeant before his 18th birthday, and he was commissioned by age 22. In 1940, when he was in his mid-20s, he went overseas to fight in WW 2, where he rose to command the Calgary Highlanders. The military values he embodied are poorly understood today, a point I want to return to later because I believe our remoteness from military culture divides us and the rest of the West very sharply from the Americans.

So. Iraq’s a mess. That’s clear. The Americans are loathed, and the place is in chaos. The Bush administration officials have no clue about what to do in Iraq tomorrow, much less a month from now. They are desperate to hand the country over – or make it look as if they have – but there is no credible someone in sight. Every choice they have is bad. They’ve lost 600 or 700 people people and killed thousands of Iraqis. And now they’ve lost their last shred of credibility. The images from Abu Ghraib have destroyed
whatever good will they had left around the world and yanked the moral high ground right out from under them.

Today, even the war's most stalwart supporters are in despair. Everyone is demanding a brand-new Iraq strategy, now. But what might it be? It's incorrect to say that the old strategy isn't working, because there is no old strategy. They're making it up as they go along. People want Donald Rumsfeld fired, because somebody up high should take the fall. But then what? It’s not as if there’s someone in the wings with a better idea.

So what about the things you don’t see on TV? What’s it really like over there?

Well I had no idea either. So I figured I’d go prepared. I packed my suitcase with bottled water and Nutri-bars, peanut butter, and a satellite phone that you can actually plug your computer into to file your story. It even has a solar attachment if your batteries fail. I also packed a pint of Johnny Walker in case of emergency, or in case I had to bribe a sheikh. The Globe wanted me to take a flak jacket, but I didn’t, because it weighs around 40 pounds and I figured I’d never wear it, and I wasn’t going into battle, and the chance of being blown up was very small.

That was the only part I got right.

These days, to get to Baghdad, you no longer have to make a 10-hour dash across the desert from Amman in a Jeep and hope you don’t run into bandits. You can take the
daily Royal Jordanian flight, which is always full of people going in and out – including people hoping to do business, though these days most of them are in the security business. The plane spirals down into the airport to avoid antiaircraft fire.

The first thing that struck me about Baghdad was how little it looks like a postwar zone. Downtown Detroit in the 70s looked worse. Most of the bombed-out buildings you see weren’t bombed out at all. They were looted. Up until 1990 Baghdad was a prosperous city, and it has lots of modern apartment buildings and office buildings and middle-class neighbourhoods. It also has a modern road system. And the second thing that struck me was the traffic.

Traffic congestion and pollution have become a significant problem. After the war the place was flooded with cars brought over duty-free and tax-free from Jordan. There was a huge pent-up demand for cars because no one had been able to buy one since the 80s. Also, gas costs 3 cents a litre. There are 5 million people in Baghdad and sometimes it seems as if there are 5 million cars.

But it’s not just cars. You can buy anything in Baghdad now. The sidewalks are stacked high with boxes containing air conditioners, TVs, and satellite dishes, all of which are popular consumer items. People have uncensored TV for the first time. Arab music videos are very popular. So is al-jazeera. There are 60 or 70 new newspapers in Baghdad. It’s the freest press in the Middle East except for Israel.
Before the war there was only rationed food. Kids had never eaten bananas before. Now there are watermelons from Egypt and imported bananas and grapes. My first day there I went into a little supermarket on one of Baghdad’s main streets to get some supplies – the place was crammed with Iraqi shoppers – and the first thing that met my eye was a large display of Pringles – those round potato chips that come in a tube.

And of course there was Johnny Walker too, in another store, and it was cheaper than the stuff I’d brought with me. And next to my hotel was an Internet café where you could get a high-speed connection 24 hours a day. There was also an internet café in the middle of Tikrit – Saddam’s old stomping ground. I wish I’d taken a picture of that. I did take a picture of the little smiley face somebody had drawn on a wall. Underneath it said Go USA. It’s probably gone now.

Now most of Iraq is not like downtown Baghdad. It’s a poor nation, and the average per capita income is around $1,000 a year. But the point is that things aren’t always as bad as they look on TV.

The big losers in Iraq aren’t the Iraqis. They’re the Americans. And Iraq, I think, is a textbook example of the dilemmas of modern empire, or what Michael Ignatieff, that brilliant thinker, calls Empire Lite.
One evening in Baghdad I arranged a meeting with a powerful member of the governing council, a man named Mouwaffak al-Rubaie. He had come back to Iraq after years in exile in London, where he was a distinguished neurologist. That week all hell had broken loose – suicide bombers had begun to blow up police stations and also blew up the Red Cross. They’d also blown up one of the three women on the governing council and almost blown up him. When I shook his hand, he had his wrist in a cast because he’d been nicked in a bomb explosion. I met him a safe house that was surrounded by a dozen armed guards, and before we went inside two of them swept the place with their guns ready to fire. He told me he changed houses all the time for security reasons.

Mouwaffak told me something I heard over and over again in Iraq. The Americans weren’t being ruthless enough. They were holding their fire and not being aggressive in rooting out insurgents. This was widely seen as a sign of weakness. He cited the rebel cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, as an example. Moqtada, he said, was not a serious political threat. He was just a rabble-rouser, and should be either bought off or disabled. Instead the Americans had pretty much left him alone. Iraqis couldn’t understand why. In the paper I wrote about what he’d said and got howls of outrage from people who thought the Americans had been way too ruthless already. That’s one example of the culture gap between the West and the Middle East.

And he told me something else I heard all the time. Democracy is all very good. But what people wanted first and foremost was order. Stability. A strong ruler who could enforce order.
In other words, the biggest problem he had with the Americans was not that they were behaving like imperialists. It was that they weren’t behaving ENOUGH like imperialists. They were failing to live up to their imperialist responsibilities.

And I was reminded of a story about the predecessor to Paul Bremer, a general named Jay Garner. General Garner was sent in right after the war to get things up and running again. And he gathered together a bunch of leading Iraqis from all the different factions – and of course they were all at each other’s throats – and then, instead of laying down the law, he turned to them and basically said, “OK, you guys are in charge, what do you want to do next?” And they were flabbergasted. They expected orders. And he wanted to be consultative, in the most progressive and sensitive modern manner.

Well, that was just one of the many ways the Americans fundamentally misread Iraq. Saddam was awful, but at least society was orderly. Your brother might disappear into his dungeons, but you wouldn’t get mugged on the street. The police were totally corrupt, but at least you knew who you had to pay off, and by how much.

The collapse of security after the war extended far beyond physical security. All the civil institutions collapsed too, because they had all been run by Saddamites. The police collapsed. The municipal governments collapsed. The oil industry, such as it was,
collapsed. All the state-run businesses collapsed. And people literally did not know what to do. The collapse was not just institutional. It was psychological.

“All our lives Saddam has always been there,” one young Iraqi explained to me. “He was there from the very first day we went to school.” He was like Stalin. If you were an educated person, Saddam determined where you would go to university and what you would be allowed to study, and what kind of work you would do afterward. He governed your entire life. Society was totally top down. Everybody took their orders from Baghdad, except the sheikhs in Fallujah, who he bought off. And suddenly there was no one giving orders any more.

As I talked with educated Iraqis, who had somehow managed to escape the Saddamite mindset, I realized that the damage to Iraq’s physical infrastructure – its crumbling schools and ruined oil refineries and decrepit hospitals and ruptured electricity grid– is not the real problem. You can fix that stuff. It’s not the hardware, it’s the software. It’s how people think and act.

This is a culture that is used to being utterly dependent on authority, both secular and religious. People aren’t accustomed to thinking independently. For the last 30 years it’s been fatal. In school – and this is true throughout the Middle East – you write down exactly what the teacher says and repeat it exactly that way on the exams. In religious school, you memorize the Koran, which you are taught is literally true. Thinking for yourself is un-islamic.
There are a bunch of other cultural differences the Americans didn’t reckon on. For example, people in the Middle East believe in genies. Even educated ones. There are genies in the Koran, and they think that these spirits, some of which are good and some of which are bad, have a powerful influence on your life. People are also extremely conspiracy-minded. I went around Iraq with a number of different drivers and translators, who are by definition relatively educated, and otherwise quite rational, and I talked with them a lot about why they think the Americans came to Iraq and what’s behind it all. Basically, they believe that everything that happens in their region is part of a deep-laid, long-term, secret American strategy planned and played out over decades. I heard that Saddam was in cahoots with the Americans over Gulf War One, and that Uday and Qusay were really in Moscow, and of course that Israel is really behind it all. It’s wild. It’s also typical. Millions of educated people from Baghdad to Cairo to Islamabad believe all kinds of crazy things like this. And if you tell them the world doesn’t work like that, they think you’re either duplicitous or naïve.

Iraqis know the Americans are there because of their oil, which, although an unstated reason for the war, is certainly true. The stability of the Middle East has always been a key concern of the United States, because if the oil doesn’t flow, the world goes down the drain – and it is not the United States and SUV lovers who would take the hardest hit. The most dependent regions in the world on imported oil are Japan and Europe. The next time you hear some protester chanting “No blood for oil,” you might ask them how they’d like a worldwide depression, which is what we’d get if the Middle Eastern oil tap were turned off.
What changed in the U.S. view was not the concern over oil security. What changed was their assessment of Saddam, who the Bush administration believed was too much of a threat to Middle East stability. And judging by his record that was a rational belief.

Anyway, the Iraqis know that they are oil rich. And many of them believe that because of that, they ought to be personally rich. After all, their neighbours in Kuwait and Saudia Arabia are. If only they got their share of the oil royalties, which, of course, Saddam and now the Americans are stealing from them, they could have a bigger house and wouldn’t have to work.

And then there’s tribalism. IN the Middle East people have not transferred their loyalties from the tribe to the state. And people’s identification with their tribes is very strong. If there were such a thing as a Wente tribe in Iraq, everyone would know instantly where I come from, who my relatives are, and what my tribal attributes are supposed to be – whether my tribe is scholarly, or religiously conservative, or big on stealing sheep. And tribal values are very different from democratic ones. For example, if you make it to an important position it is a virtue to hire your relatives, to whom you have an obligation. And after all they are people you can trust. And people in Iraq are very enthusiastic about democracy -- so long as they think their tribe will come out on top.

Now some people will say, hey, you’re blaming the Iraqis for America’s mistakes. I don’t mean to do that. I’m just pointing out the Middle East has been a pretty bad neighbourhood for a pretty long time.
The Americans are being roasted for not planning for the period after the war, and that’s fair. But it’s not at all clear to me how much better things would have gone for the Americans if they had done everything, quote, right.

For example, people are now accusing the U.S. administration of willful negligence for not putting Iraqis in charge of the prisons. Maybe that would have avoided the catastrophe of Abu Ghraib. But imagine for a minute the howls of outrage if they had put the Iraqis in charge-- and how we would have liked the Iraqi-style treatment of detainees.

The real problem is that the management of empire and of extended occupation has become impossibly complex. My guess is that no amount of pre-war planning could have done very much to offset the chaos of postwar Iraq.

And now we’ve got the pictures of prisoner abuse. The ones we’ve all seen, and everybody in Iraq and the Arab world has seen, and everybody in Europe and Canada who already didn’t like this war.

Those pictures give ammunition to everybody to say, ‘You see? The Americans are hypocrites. They’re no better than Saddam.” The U.S. administration has no idea how to manage this catastrophe, and there's no way they can regain the moral high ground
The underlying story of the abuses is starting to become clear. Last fall, the insurgents sharply stepped up their attacks on diplomats, police stations and U.S. soldiers. Many Iraqis sympathetic to the Americans stopped helping them because they were afraid for their lives. The U.S. military was increasingly desperate for information on the insurgency, and under enormous pressure to check it.

So they started arresting more people, and prison guards were instructed to soften them up -- in ways we have now seen -- for interrogations that clearly sometimes became brutal.

In this post military age, it's popular to argue that the pornography of Abu Ghraib is the inevitable product of military culture and military values. As one writer put it in The Globe and Mail last week, “Abuse is predictable in any group that defines masculinity through power, strength, and aggression.” Other people argue that the abuses simply expose the soldiers' racist attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims.

In fact, a lot of westerners harbour their own conspiracy theories about America. Many of my friends—the same people who think that military culture invariably breeds sadistic thugs – think the abuses of Abu Ghraib were just par for the course. I can disagree with them. But I will never be able to persuade them otherwise.
People in Ross Ellis’s day would have been shocked by these slanders on military culture. But today you hear them all the time among highly educated people. I guess it shouldn’t be surprising. Very few of my friends know anyone in a uniform. They’ve had virtually no exposure to military people or military life or the military ethos. They can’t imagine being soldiers themselves, and they think that people who want to be soldiers must have something wrong with them. They have formed their impressions of the military from the goons in Somalia and the massacre at My Lai, the sexual abuse scandals of Tailhook and all the rest.

The only way they like their soldiers is without guns. No violence please, we’re peacekeepers.

I wish I could have taken some of my friends to an army base I visited, near Mosul, in the north.

I met amazing 24-year-olds who were flying Apache Attack helicopters one month and rebuilding schools the next. I met 34-year-olds whose jobs were to get oil refineries up and running again, and make sure the Kurds and Arabs didn’t start fighting with each other, and sorting out land disputes, building water systems, and delivering heaps of food to every mosque in the area as a gesture of friendship during Ramadan, and in between catching people who were trying to blow up the oil pipeline. None of them had ever done any of these things before. And they were doing them superbly. The men and women in uniform I met in Iraq were smart, disciplined, principled and deeply idealistic.
No one was more furious, more sick, over the images of prisoner abuse than they were. As they saw it, those rotten apples have betrayed everything they stood for and everything they’d fought for.

The greatest tragedy of Abu Ghraib is that it negates all the good they’ve done.

But what made the story a true propaganda disaster, as well as a moral disaster, was the images.

The Bush administration likes to say this is a war of ideas. But it’s really a war of images. And our side – the western side, if you like – is losing. The image many people will remember from this war is not the toppling of Saddam’s statue in Firdos Square. It’s the hooded man standing on the box, as if he’s about to be electrocuted. It’s the smirking girl with the naked man on the leash.

For these images, we can thank the digital age – something else Donald Rumsfeld didn’t take into account. This is the first occupation in history where the soldiers are packing digital cameras and portable videocams. And with digital cameras you take thousands of pictures. The soldiers have CDs and army-issue computers, so they can download all their pictures and send them to the folks back home or swap them around or post them on
the Internet. Who knows why they took these – maybe to intimidate other prisoners, or as trophies, like Japanese ears from WW II.

And there are more pictures, and worse ones. And there are lots of copies. It is inevitable that they’ll get out too.

Now, this is not My Lai. Nobody has gunned down hundreds of villagers. And justice will be done, the wrongdoers will be punished, and if America were really an evil empire then the world would never have heard of it at all.

All these things are true. But we are living in an age where people have gotten more upset over what the detainees were being fed at Guantanamo than what the Russians were doing to Grozny. It’s a world of moral asymmetries, and we ourselves have internalized them.

Another problem for our side is that the audience watching al-jazeera will never know the total story. They see pictures of Americans shelling a minaret in fallujah. That’s inflammatory. What they don’t know is that the minaret was full of shooters.

What is worse, it’s impossible for America's conduct to be perfect. And every time something goes wrong -- as it will -- people are going to holler war crimes, and sometimes they'll be right.
And now the terrorists have given us an image back – the image of nick berg, being decapitated. You can find the unexpurgated version on the internet, although I do not advise you to watch it.

I do not think this war of images is winnable, not in the middle east, and not in America either.

Consider the plans for the goons from abu ghraib. They will be brought to justice in open and public show trials that the Bush administration hopes will prove to the Iraqis that the Americans are really the good guys, after all.

Unfortunately, the punishment, whatever it is, will fail to satisfy the Iraqi people. No matter what verdict, the Iraqi street will go wild with anger and indignation at the lightness of the punishment, because anything short of death will be considered as too light.

At which point those Americans at home will began to ask themselves: Why are we bringing our guys to justice, while their guys, whose crimes are infinitely worse, out are out there planning to kill even more of us?

The commentator Lee Harris puts it this way: “When the average American sees images of other average Americans on trial in Iraq, howled and screamed at by mobs of Iraqis, whose side you do think he will be on -- the side of the Iraqis or the side of men and
women whose only difference from himself is that they were assigned to a miserable job in a hellhole of a prison in the midst of a war that isn't quite a war, fighting an enemy who isn't quite an enemy.”

The Americans are being asked to hate only "the bad guys" in the Arab world, while simultaneously being asked to sacrifice their sons and their pocketbooks in order to create a happy future for "the good guys" in the Arab world. Yet their television and computer screens are full of the images of the bad guys of the Arab world doing unspeakably ghastly things to them, while they search in vain for the image of even one of the good guys. Show us just one photograph of Iraqis publicly denouncing this gruesome act.

The enemy has given us compelling images of what the Americans are fighting against in Iraq. But there are no equally compelling images that show them what they’re fighting for. Many Americans are beginning to wonder if there are any good guys. Many Americans simply wish the Arabs would go away. They just don't care any more about the Arabs and their welfare, or about their humiliation, or about their historical grievances, simply because all the images that come to us from their world horrify and appall us, including the disturbing images of Americans doing things that no normal American would ever dream of doing to other people back at home, if only because they would never be given the opportunity.
If I were Mr. and Mrs. Suburbia, I'd be having a severe case of empire-fatigue by now. They wrote a cheque for $87-billion, and the people they liberated hate them more than ever.

The great irony here is that one of the main war aims – certainly not the first one, but maybe the third or fourth or fifth – has been achieved. The Iraqis really are better off now. In the north, the Kurds are happy as clams – or they are so long as the Americans stick around. There are no floods of refugees (as alarmists predicted) because the two conditions that create refugees -- starvation and genocide -- are absent. The Americans have pumped billions in to pay the teachers, the police and the doctors. Before the war they were making $5 a month. Now they make $150. Millions of kids have been vaccinated. They can eat bananas.

I doubt you or I will live long enough to see Iraq turn into a shining beacon of democracy like, say, Connecticut. But most Iraqis are measurably better off than they were in March of 2003, and they’ll tell you so. They also think the future will be better than the present, and they're probably right. Whatever regime they wind up with a year or five years from now will, in all likelihood, be better than Saddam. And no, there was no other way to get rid of him. Without the Americans Saddam would still be there, preparing the succession for his charming sons, Udday and Qusay.

So on balance I think the war was good for the Iraqis. But it’s been very, very bad for the United States, and that means for the rest of us too. I think Americans will be so fed up
with Iraq that they'll have no stomach for foreign entanglements for a long time to come, no matter how just the cause. Forget the asking them to intervene in the next Kosovo, to say nothing of the next Rwanda. The Americans are finished with doing good around the world.

So, lots of people are saying to me, knowing what you know now, would you have supported this war? That’s a fair question and I’ve thought a lot about it. So let me tell you three final stories.

One is the story of a man I met who had survived 10 years in saddam’s prisons. He escaped Iraq and lives in Toronto now – we picked him out of a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia where he’d been rotting for a couple years because nobody would take in these people, least of all the Saudis. In Iraq he was a scholar. In Toronto he stacks boxes in a warehouse. And he is one of the most grateful Canadians I’ve ever met.

I do not understand why this man is still alive. When he first went to prison he was confined in a box for three months that was slightly bigger than a coffin. Then he was sent to abu ghraib – yes, the same one. He was put into a cell that was about 10 x 10 feet with 30 other men. There was no room to lie down. Every morning the guards would come round and say, time for your breakfast treat, and they would take one of the prisoners out and shoot him. Ayyab was tortured in various ways.
His family thought he was dead. The government sent them a bill for the price of the bullet it said had been used to kill him.

At the end of our conversation ayyab asked me if I wanted to see his foot. A common form of torture was to shoot a nail through someone’s foot with a nail gun, and this had been done to him. He took off his shoe and sock and showed me what his foot looked like. It was terribly deformed.

I met his wife, too. She was a shy young woman of around 35. She was also a refugee, a widow, and they had met and married in Toronto. She had two kids. Her first husband was a doctor. But the regime shot him.

Second story. Near Babylon -- the ancient city of the hanging gardens -- is a town called Hilla. It is the site of a mass grave containing people who were shot during the shi’a uprising of 1991, just after the first gulf war. Nobody knows how many people are buried there because they ran out of money to excavate it. Most estimates say around 30,000.

The gravesite is along a country road that runs right off the highway. And there’s really not much to see – an acre or two have been excavated, and there are some mounds of
earth to mark the graves, with scraps of clothing on top. And when I was there a peasant woman came by leading her donkey. And I stopped her and asked if she’d lived here then, when the massacre happened, and she said she had, and she told me how, every night, saddam’s men would come out to dig the holes, and every morning they would bring in the prisoners, men, women, children, their hands tied behind them, and shoot them and cover them with dirt. Nobody in the neighbourhood ever talked about what they saw, and they never did, until the war last year. And she told me that sometimes, at the beginning, the dogs would come to dig up the bodies, and her father would go out there and chase them away and bury them again.

And here’s the third story. There was a guy I used to talk to in the internet café. He was the night manager. A wonderful young man, very smart with computers, and bailed me out of my problems several times. One night I asked him if he was better off now than before the war, and he said absolutely not. Life was very hard. He used to have a government job he really liked, and now he had to work two jobs just to support his family. He worked this job from 8 at night to 8 in the morning, then went home to sleep for 3 hours, then went to his other job. And every two weeks he had about a half-day off to see his wife and baby.

And then I said, well, do you wish saddam were still in charge? Do you wish you had your old life back? And he looked at me, and sort of drew himself up, and said, No. Because now I can stand up like a man.
And whenever someone asks me how I can possibly defend the war, I think of
Mohammad, who told me that for the first time in his life he can stand up, like a man.

Thank you.

Kagan: