

Save Iraqi history? 'No tanks,' says U.S. military

By Kenneth Janda

One can distinguish between destroying cultural artifacts yourself and letting others destroy them.

The Taliban in Afghanistan employed the direct style of destruction.

The Philistines in Iraq followed the indirect style. Unfortunately for the ancient artifacts in both countries, it was a distinction without a difference.

In March 2001, the ruling Taliban used explosives to destroy two towering statues of Buddha carved in a mountain about 75 miles outside Kabul. These statues, about 120 and 170 feet tall, had survived for more than 1,500 years before the Taliban acted.

The Taliban, which roughly translates as religious students, destroyed the statues for sacred reasons, contending that the statues were created to be worshiped. Such graven images are blasphemous to Islam and had to go, they said.



Reuters file photo

Now gone, this ancient Buddha in Afghanistan was the target of Taliban fanaticism. Another similar statue also was destroyed.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The Taliban destroyed the Buddha statues despite pleas from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the international community, including other Muslim nations.

According to *The New York Times*, the director general of UNESCO said, "Words fail me to describe adequately my feelings of consternation and powerlessness as I see the reports of the irreversible damage that is being done to Afghanistan's exceptional cultural heritage."

The Taliban sought to redirect Afghanistan's society by destroying its culture.

Philistines, on the other hand, are not so calculating about cultural matters. Statues, artwork and stuff are not that important for today's world.

The term "Philistine" is rooted in biblical times, deriving from Philistia, a region of ancient Palestine. *The American Heritage Dictionary* says that, over time in the English language, Philistine became defined as "a smug, ignorant, especially middle-class person who is regarded as being indifferent or antagonistic to artistic and cultural values."

Philistines were in charge of Baghdad this month, when the National Museum of Iraq was looted of more than 100,000 items, some several thousand years old.

Quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, Torkom Demirjian, president of a New York antiquities gallery, called the loss "one of the greatest cultural disasters in recent history."

The loss could have been prevented. Weeks before the invasion of Iraq, American experts on the Middle East had informed the Pentagon about the immense value of the museum and urged that it be protected.

Professor McGuire Gibson at the University of Chicago's famed Oriental Institute was among those who stressed the importance of preserving the museum for the world's cultural heritage. Its collection reaches back 7,000 years.

Interviewed in *The New York Times*, Gibson thought he had gotten his message through.

"I didn't think that we would stand by and let them loot the museum," he said.

However, the *Times* also reported that—despite scholars' warnings—the government had not instructed military commanders to provide protection for the museum—or for the Baghdad library, which also was looted.

When asked about failing to protect the museum and the library, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said: "It's as much as anything else a matter of priorities."

Nidal Amin, deputy director of the looted museum, was incredulous.

She said the looting would not have happened if just one American tank stayed outside with just two American soldiers in the door.

"They don't know this is a museum? They don't like a museum?" she asked.

Certainly the Philistines in charge knew about the museum and had nothing against museums, but it was a matter of priorities.

Oh, yes, the military did assign soldiers to chip away the disrespectful floor art depicting President George Bush I, which was walked on by visitors to the Al Rashid Hotel.

It was a matter of priorities.

Kenneth Janda is the Payson S. Wild professor emeritus of political science at Northwestern University.