



**Episode 967: The Failure in Iraq: A Whistleblowing Eyewitness to the
“Reconstruction” of Iraq**

Guest: Peter van Buren

WOODS: What an interesting perspective you bring, and thank goodness you know how to write.

VAN BUREN: [laughing]

WOODS: Oh my gosh. And it's so — you also know the techniques. You could have started the book by saying, "In 2009, I was sent to —." No. You start with this extremely revealing story about a bunch of books called *My Arabic Library*, and what I took from that is what I think you were intending to convey, that here we have in microcosm the whole American approach to Iraq. Can you start with — even though it's a trivial story, I think it's not. Can you tell us that story?

VAN BUREN: Absolutely. When I was sent to Iraq, my mission working for the Department of State, as I was, was nothing less to win the war. The military had tried to win the war by blowing stuff up and having surges and all those kinds of things and it just hadn't worked, so the idea was that we were going to use soft power, we were going to win hearts and minds, and it was going to fall to me, I guess, to do that. One of the so-called tools that the administration provided to us — and I hesitate to remind people that my work basically straddled both the end of the Bush administration and the beginning of the Obama administration. In terms of planning, there was no real difference between the two as far as Iraq was concerned.

One of the tools I was given to win the war was *My Arabic Library*, and this was the sense that if we took some of the classic books of American literature, the books that American high school students studiously avoid reading, like *Moby Dick* or *Anne of Green Gables* — I guess that's a Canadian one. But anyways, all of these classics of literature — Mark Twain — translated them into Arabic, and then sent them out into the middle of Iraq, where people at that time had no water, limited supplies of food, needed veterinary supplies and pesticides to grow food more than anything — if we gave them these translated books, they would simply discover democracy by osmosis, I guess, throw off the yoke of al-Qaeda, and become America's ally in the Middle East.

WOODS: And it turns out it didn't actually go like that. The final disposition of the books is quite revealing.

VAN BUREN: Well, I pause only because I wanted your listeners to kind of fill in the gap there and remember that Iraq is not currently a blossom of democracy. No. In fact, by the time the books actually arrived, no one wanted them. We literally could not give them away. The schools, such as they were, were mostly concerned about trying to figure out how to segregate their students. Schools were male and female during Saddam's time. During the U.S. occupation, the religious fundamentalists were raking them back into boy-girl, and that's what they were concerned about. And so we ended up having to basically bribe a local school principal to take them off our hands. He in turn humiliated us, me, the Americans by forcing me to recruit a bunch of soldiers to unload all the books into a truck while he sat in the shade and drank tea, watching us. And then we stumbled upon the books a week or two later. They were dumped in a ditch where, if they're serving a function as minor landfill, well, that puts it far ahead of most of the other reconstruction and hearts and minds projects we did in Iraq.

WOODS: Okay, so that's really why you start with this very — That story drew me right in. So tell me this: of course, as you say in the book, the Bush administration had not planned for this kind of lengthy reconstruction phase, because it was never presumed to be necessary. There'd be a glorious victory. The Iraqi public would be entirely on board with the American agenda, and everything would move smoothly. Now, frankly, I'll say this in parenthesis: who knows if they actually in their heart of hearts believed that? Maybe some of them did. They couldn't all have been that shortsighted, but maybe some of them did. So now they throw people like you in the middle of this mess and they say, You fix it. Well, what exact mandate were you given? What exact kind of things were you supposed to do to make lemonade out of these lemons?

VAN BUREN: Well, it's important to remember that I was at that time a 20-some-year veteran of the Department of State, and I had seen administrations come and go. One of the things that was important was that people like me, the professional diplomats, were nonpartisan — we were not political appointees. I joined the government when Ronald Reagan was president and I served through all the presidents and left the government when Obama was president. So you see them come and you see them go.

So we went there with a mission, if you will, a task, not a political agenda. And the mission was nothing short of winning the war. I was supposed to, not in any particular order, bring democracy and free elections out to the rural areas where I was assigned; I was supposed to defeat al-Qaeda by creating job opportunities; I was supposed to sort out the Sunni-Shia divide. The area where we were working in east of Baghdad had both Sunnis and Shias and they were killing each other, and we were supposed to fix that. We were also supposed to fix the water supply and bring sewage and clean water. So it was kind of a long to-do list as these things go —

WOODS: [laughing]

VAN BUREN: — particularly since I arrived in 2009. The war had already been going on and people had already failed at all these tasks for six years. More importantly, the military units that I was partnered with had equally no idea. The very first night I arrived at the forward operating base where I was assigned, I said in my best sort of can-do attitude to the military guy there, the colonel — I said, "Colonel, I'm here to

carry out your plan to reconstruct Iraq." And he said, "Well, I was sort of hoping you knew what the plan was." And while we had a very nice relationship as individuals, things kind of went downhill from there in terms of getting any work done.

WOODS: I don't even know how to respond to that. Let me ask you: did you support the war initially?

VAN BUREN: Again, as a State Department career employee, officially I had no opinions on this. Personally, I was very much opposed to the war from a very functional point of view. I certainly take no pleasure in seeing people killed and maimed. But as a professional diplomat looking at this from a geopolitical point of view, I could see nothing good coming out of it.

WOODS: Did you find yourself standing there, though, saying, This is why in my heart of hearts I did not want you people to do this? This is an impossible position for anyone to be in.

VAN BUREN: Absolutely, absolutely. As a diplomat, you look for stability, because stability is, no pun intended, the base on which everything else gets built. If people are worried about how they're going to eat, how they're going to take care of their children, they are really not focusing on democracy or My Arabic Library. And once I saw what was happening in the war, that it was essentially a massive, active destabilization for Iraq and the entire Middle East, it was obvious that it was going to fail and it was a terrible idea. And so I was opposed to the war from the beginning on humanitarian grounds and very practical grounds, and every minute of every day that I was on the ground in Iraq, I felt like running to the White House, whoever happened to be sitting in the Oval Office, opening the window and screaming, "We tried to tell you so."

WOODS: Yeah, actually what I want to know is, when you look back on your time there, are you able to say, Well, I did at least have a minor victory here and there? Or was it just completely overwhelming?

VAN BUREN: Well, to be sadly honest, it was a complete failure, because, among other things, the people that were carrying out the programs of reconstruction and so-called democratization in Iraq all moved en masse to Afghanistan, and there are versions of My Arabic Library translated into the local languages now afoot in Afghanistan.

WOODS: Ugh [laughing].

VAN BUREN: And quite tragically, one of the American diplomats Anne Smedinghoff, who lost her life in Afghanistan, was in fact blown up by the Taliban on a mission to hand out books in the countryside. And so in fact, I guess it would be My Pashtu Library, literally claimed the life of one of my diplomatic colleagues. And in my case, I came out of the experience with a funny story and a hunk of bitterness ground into my soul. She died.

WOODS: Boy, that's just horrifying. It would be difficult to be put in this situation with a list of impossible goals that, of course, the U.S. government has no idea how to carry out; they're just going to throw you in there and see what happens. That would be difficult enough, but to have to do it against a backdrop of violence and danger, constant danger makes this – I don't want to make light of it, but it makes it almost laughable what they were expecting of you.

VAN BUREN: Well, this is what caused me finally to break with the U.S. government and to become a whistleblower, to write the book *We Meant Well* that exposed all of this and ultimately be driven out of the government under threat of prosecution for doing all that, was the realization – and it was a slow-ticking realization, not a one-day epiphany, but a slow-ticking realization that what I first thought was kind of silly and stupid – bringing these books to Iraq or telling the Iraqi women they should throw off their burqas and become free – what sounded silly at first was actually quite tragic, in that this distribution of books, the projects that we were asked to carry out, the little missions that we ran were putting lives in danger, not necessarily just my life, though there were diplomats who died because of this, but the lives of the soldiers and the lives of the Iraqis that we dealt with.

Many times, the Iraqis who chose to believe us that we were there to help them were not well received when the bad guys moved into the territory, because of course the Americans, we were never really there for the long run, and when we dropped off some supplies and then left, well, the bad guys came. And the people who wanted to pair up with us, who believed our silliness, put their own lives in danger. We were harming the people we were trying to help. And it was at that point that I realized that this was not just some funny stories, though they are pretty funny. It was in fact a great tragedy. And I was enabling it, I was participating in it, and therefore, I had a role in trying to say something about it, even if I didn't think I could stop it.

WOODS: The story of Iraq's democracy is one that I bet most Americans don't know much about. What we remember, certainly what I remember are these photographs of Iraqis with the purple finger, which indicated that they had voted. So I think a lot of Americans probably think, Well, okay, that problem was solved. We brought democracy to Iraq. Yeah, there's some instability there, but at least there's no more Saddam. What's your approach to thinking about that?

VAN BUREN: Well, what we failed to do is to articulate what democracy was and instead create a series of show elections. Iraq is now and was then a remarkably divided country. Your listeners who know a lot more about this than I do will realize I'm being a little superficial in saying that you've got Sunnis, you've got Shias, and you've got Kurds. There's numerous groups and subgroups and subdivisions, but we'll use those terms as a matter of convenience here with a wink and a nudge to your listeners who know the full details. But those groups saw the elections simply as a chance to get the people who were like them into power over the people who weren't like them. And so for the Sunni groups, the purpose of the election was simply a mechanism to put Sunnis back in charge of Iraq, as Saddam was, so they could oppress the Kurds and the Shias, and vice-versa for the others.

And so all that enthusiasm for voting, the purple fingers and things like that, were essentially an expression of the antithesis of democracy. They were an expression of

the tribalism, the religious differences, the political-social classes that the United States aided and abetted. Sometimes we did it willfully and, you know, wink-wink, go ahead, "Purple fingers in front of the media, please," and sometimes we did it because we ourselves were fully ignorant of these things.

But in the end, we did not enable a democracy. We did not create the roots of a democracy in any way whatsoever. We imposed a pseudo democratic-looking system on top of a powder keg of differences and then stepped back and acted surprised when in the Iraq of, say, today, 2017, you have mass reprisals by Shia militias directed against Sunnis. You see that going on in Mosul right now. You have the Kurds voting on September 25th to declare their independence as a separate nation. And of course you have the Iranians now largely in control of eastern Iraq and growing out west, taking advantage more cleverly than we did of these religious and political differences. It was all very predictable, but you had to be open-minded enough to believe that it wasn't going to work to predict what it was going to look like when it failed. And it was that hubris, that inability – "inability's" not the right word – unwillingness to even include failure as a potential outcome that ultimately doomed us, probably from day one.

WOODS: All right, I have more questions to ask you, but first let's thank our sponsor.

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All right, I want to move on eventually to the trouble you got in for writing the book, but before I do that – and we have limited time, but that's partly by design. I really want people to read your book here. And by the way, give us the full title again.

VAN BUREN: Sure, the book is called *We Meant Well*, and the subtitle is *How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*.

WOODS: Yeah, that is a devastating title.

VAN BUREN: Well, the first part I have to emphasize, because a week doesn't go by when I don't get a terribly angry letter from someone saying, We didn't mean well at all; you're just another Bush/Obama, depending on who they're most angry at – you're just another Bush/Obama political appointee. I stress the title *We Meant Well* is ironic. Next time around, I'm going to have a less ironic book title. I've learned that lesson. The subtitle, *How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*, was something I insisted on with the publisher, because I said no one else is going to take responsibility for losing this war. So I played a pretty small part in it all, but I will personally take responsibility for losing the Iraq War, since no one else is going to do it.

WOODS: Well, what was the feeling you had as you arrived? Was it a sense of doom? Was it a sense of, well, maybe there's a 3% chance the neocons are right about the way the world works? And how did that change over the months? Was it just a sinking feeling of inevitability or what?

VAN BUREN: Not surprisingly, or surprisingly, even persons like myself who were inside the government and whose life and job were based on being informed about current affairs and national affairs, we were not given the fully story of what was really going on in Iraq. We were getting the same whitewashed version of "success is just around the corner; the surge is working, will work, soon will work" that the general public was receiving. So I arrived in Iraq fully propagandized and fully misinformed about the conditions on the ground. When I was initially in Baghdad at the American embassy, the \$1 billion, physically world's largest embassy, at that time staffed at the world's largest embassy levels, the level of misinformation was equally high. They were cut off from the reality on the ground, and again, presented me with this very positive, forward-looking stance on things.

It was only after I was flown out to the remote forward operating base – we were located about halfway between Baghdad and the Iranian border in a rural area – that the on-the-ground truth started to present itself. And it didn't take very, very long. The soldiers that were responsible for my safety and for carrying out some of these programs that I was working on were quite explicit about how dangerous it was, how little we could trust the Iraqi people we were working with, and how large the Iranian presence was in our area, both Iranian special forces, Iranian political operatives, and Iranian religious clerics. And it was blatant to the people who actually were literally the boots on the ground that this was not working, and my education began from moment one. I say it was a fairly quick turnaround in terms of me understanding things. I was mortared 72 times during my year there –

WOODS: Oh my.

VAN BUREN: – at night, almost always at night. And that's a very quick reminder that the war is not going well. Shot at. I was not in a vehicle that was hit by an IED, but there were vehicles that were part of our group that were. And to drive the point home, the only American deaths that occurred in the units that I was assigned with were three suicides, soldiers who took their own lives. And if anything was to drive home the utter failure of what we're doing, it was the fact that we were killing ourselves. And those realities were very, very hard to ignore. And it was that continual process that said I cannot be a silent participant in this and I cannot be a witness to this, that it is an obligation, a conscience decision that I need to try to speak out.

WOODS: Now let's talk about the trouble you got in when you released this book. Allegedly, you were releasing classified information, but what classified information?

VAN BUREN: Well, as I'm sure you'll be surprised to learn, the U.S. government was not happy that I was going to tell everybody what I saw in Iraq.

WOODS: Yeah.

VAN BUREN: Because I had been there for a year and I had participated in all of these things, I had a certain credibility in my description of what was going on. They didn't like that. And so after having my book cleared by the appropriate U.S. government authorities to not have any classified information in it, when the book came out and a bit of a media storm erupted around it – this was in 2011 when the book came out – when a media storm erupted around it, the government needed to respond.

And their first attempt to discredit me was to claim – falsely claim there was classified information in the book. There was nothing classified in there at all, and I took great pains to make sure it was unclassified, because I didn't want to give them that easy way to discredit me the way we saw later with Manning and Snowden. That didn't work enough, and so they went back and just said I made it all up, and, well, that didn't really stick. And eventually, this devolved down to that I had basically embarrassed the government and was not a whistleblower but simply someone seeking to exploit my own time in the government for personal profit and a disgruntled employee. I think we now understand that this is a very set way for the government to act when someone does speak out, whether that's a whistleblower like Snowden or Manning or just someone who wants to tell the truth to the American people about what's being done in their name.

I fought back and was defended by the American Civil Liberties Union as a First Amendment issue and by an attorney named Jesselyn Radack. Jesselyn has gone on to help represent Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. The joke is she practiced with me and got better at this and then went on to the people who really were whistleblowers [laughing]. But I eventually worked out an agreement where I retired from the federal government and we essentially agreed to leave each other alone. And I went my separate way and have gone on to write two other books, and the federal government has gone on its way to reenter the Iraq War where who knows how many American soldiers are back fighting over the same pieces of ground that myself and others lived on years ago? So there's a happy ending.

WOODS: Well, let's go back to something maybe a little bit less happy. I guess people might think that – we hear this a lot of times with a lot of government policies, that there was corruption – like in Venezuela, for example, we're hearing that there was corruption there. But you know, there's corruption all over the world and people still get toilet paper, so I think it goes beyond simple corruption. So here, I bet there was corruption on a variety of levels, but that doesn't mean that if there hadn't been corruption, your mission would have been anymore doable. But did you observe anything like that, either from the Iraqis or the Americans, that you feel at liberty to disclose?

VAN BUREN: Sure. I was gratefully shielded, I guess, or lucky or whatever that I did not see some of the corruption that is now becoming more and more obvious to us, people who were literally stealing things. What I saw was a form of corruption that I'll have to just refer to as corporate-level. This wasn't an individual who was skimming 10% off the top of something or overpricing items to make money for him- or herself. This was corruption at a massive, massive level, billions of dollars to set up bases that were unnecessary or entire programs to provide, well, My Arabic Library, for example, at great cost to the U.S. government, knowing that it had no actual purpose.

So if you want to call that corruption, if you want to call that policy, those are words and we can sit down and argue which is the most appropriate word. But the theft of U.S. government resources was essentially baked into the system. It was part of the system at a level that makes the idea of somebody skimming a little off the top seem kind of laughably small. It's like the guy in the casino who steals soda cans out the backdoor while somebody else is inside rigging the roulette wheel. It was quite amazing how much money was spent knowing that it was going to accomplish

absolutely nothing. You could probably argue the entire war was nothing but one massive exercise in spiritual, financial, and taxpayer waste corruption.

WOODS: Tell us about your website and what you're writing about these days.

VAN BUREN: Absolutely. I write for a number of different places. I write for *The American Conservative* and I write for *The New York Times* and I write for different organizations. But my website is called WeMeantWell.com, after the name of the book. And I include most of my writing there as well as some informal stuff. There's also links to my other books, one book about the economy during the 1970s and '80s here in the United States called *Ghosts of Tom Joad*, and my new book, which is called *Hooper's War*, which deals with the issues of moral injury and PTSD among soldiers and civilians. I'm on Twitter at @wemeantwell and I hope that people who have a chance to listen to this interview feel free to engage with me on all those different places. I'm very active on social media and more than happy to mix it up if someone wants to either support my positions or get into a little discussion about where I might be right or wrong.

WOODS: Well, you know, I think I first found out about your book – and I should have – maybe in the back of my mind I remembered seeing it here and there, but I think it was in the byline, your bio in an article at *The American Conservative*, and the title alone I found completely arresting. And I thought, Why have I not spoken to this guy? So then I went – So you think you write an article and it says a little something about you at the end and that's just a throwaway thing and it doesn't matter. That's exactly how I found out about you and the book.

So the book that we've been talking about today – and of course I want to get you back on for your newest one – is *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*. I am going to link to this book and to your Twitter and everything over at TomWoods.com/967, which is the episode number for today. But I know I'm going to have people saying, Woods, you should have kept him on longer. I know. I know I should have. But really I shouldn't have, because then you wouldn't have gone out and bought his book, and that's what you should do, because you will find this – it reads like a novel, and then you realize, wow, a guy actually lived this, and you're going to learn a lot from it.

VAN BUREN: Well, let's compromise and have me back on again and we can talk some more.

WOODS: Yeah, that is exactly how we will handle this. I'll have you back on. Thanks so much, Peter. I appreciate it.

VAN BUREN: My great pleasure. Thank you.