

April 16th, 2003

Mr George W Bush
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr President:

During the military preparations and subsequent implementation of military actions for the war in Iraq, the cultural community in the United States and elsewhere repeatedly pointed out our war responsibilities to the cultural heritage of Iraq. As the cradle of human civilization, the Iraqi territory holds unique artistic, historic, archaeological and scientific evidence of the birth of the very civilization of which our Nation forms part. During the fierce fighting of the past few weeks, we were relieved to see that our military leaders and the coalition partners took extreme precautions to avoid targeting cultural sites along with other non-military places. It was also comforting to receive reports that our armed forces have conducted inspections at some of the important archaeological sites.

This past weekend, however, the situation changed drastically. Alarming news and dismaying television images confirmed the wholesale pillaging and wanton destruction of the cultural treasures of Iraq by local thugs and thieves. The extensive looting and vandalism of the completely unguarded National Museum in Baghdad have caused irreversible losses in a cultural patrimony that belongs not only to the Iraqis, but to all mankind. Other reports have indicated similar pillaging in Mosul. If this process is allowed to go unchecked, the catastrophic destruction may easily spread to hundreds of more remote, but equally valuable sites.

As leaders of national organizations representing millions of Americans who believe that the material culture inherited from our ancestors constitutes one of humanity's greatest treasures, we call on you to use all means at your disposal to stop the pillaging and protect cultural sites and institutions of Iraq. These include historic sites, historic urban districts, cultural landscapes, buildings of unusual aesthetic values, archaeological sites, museums, libraries, archives and other repositories of cultural property and human memory.

We also call for the protection of our colleagues, the Iraqi professionals and scholars who work in these places, thus enabling them to carry out their stewardship duties. During this period of extreme hardship, they need professional support and reinforcement to assist them with their tasks. The United States and our Coalition Partners should provide this assistance at once.

We call for the immediate adoption of strict and detailed plans to attempt to recover the stolen artifacts and reconstruct the Iraqi national collections. This should be done through police action, international cooperation, import and export interdictions and other means that may prove effective in this endeavor. Such plans should include international cooperation and exchange of information, as well as strict monitoring of illicit trade within Iraq and its border nations by our armed forces.

Finally, we call upon our Government to ensure that the funds destined for post-war recovery and reconstruction provide sufficient funds for the field of cultural resources. This would include funds for the immediate physical and institutional reconstruction of Iraqi cultural agencies and organizations, as well as long-term funds for strengthening institutional and professional capacity in order to ensure a permanent protection and effective management of heritage resources and historic sites of Iraq.

We place at your disposal the joint and individual expertise of our organizations to assist our country in providing this protection and recovering the stolen artifacts for the people of Iraq.

The return to freedom of the Iraqi people must include the freedom to enjoy the great heritage resources inherited from their ancestors. As the only source of real authority in Iraq at the present time, the United States and its Coalition Partners bear an obligation to all Americans, to all Iraqis, to the world community and to generations yet unborn to protect the cultural resources of Iraq.

In contrast to the inhuman Iraqi regime that has just ended, the United States is a benevolent nation committed to the realization of the full human potential through freedom, democracy, fair play and the rule of law. In our own country, we revere and protect the thousands of places whence our rich historic legacy sprang and grew. They lie at the root of our national identity and are a constant source of inspiration. We hope that the right will be provided to the people of Iraq, and by extension, to all the citizens of our country and the world who can claim the ancestral treasures of Iraq as partly our own.

Respectfully,

American Anthropological Association
William E Davis, III, Executive Director
Atlanta, Georgia

American Cultural Resources Association
Loretta Lautzahnheiser, President

American Institute of Architects Historic Resources Committee
Elizabeth Corbin Murphy, AIA, Chair
Washington, DC

American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works
Jerry Podany, AIC/FAIC, President
Elizabeth "Penny" Jones, AIC/FAIC, Executive Director
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American Research Institute in Turkey
Ken Sams, President
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American Schools of Oriental Research

Lawrence T Geraty, PhD

Archaeological Institute of America
Jane Waldbaum, President
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College Art Association
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Council of American Overseas Research Centers
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George Wright Society (a professional association of park-protected area researchers and managers)
David Harmon, Executive Director
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The Getty Conservation Institute
Timothy P Whalen, Director
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The Middle East Studies Association of North America
Amy W. Newhall, Executive Director

National Coalition for History
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National Humanities Alliance
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National Geographic Society
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US/ICOMOS - United States Committee, International Council on Monuments and Sites
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