Collateral damage

Article by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, Special to the Star Tribune

Updated: May 14, 2011 - 4:54 PM

In 2006, while harvesting dates in a grove south of Baghdad, several Shi'ite women were kidnapped by four heavily armed Sunni gunmen. One of the women asked, "Where are you taking us?" "To the eyes of Hell," the gunman replied.

Scenes like this had become commonplace. Mark Kukis, a correspondent for Time magazine, reminds us that the fall of Saddam Hussein unleashed an orgy of chaos, with nationalistic guerrillas, Sunni radicals, Shi'ite militias and Al Qaeda terrorists pitted against one another -- and against U.S. troops.

In "Voices From Iraq," Kukis uses interviews with 70 Iraqis to provide a moving account of the impact of war and occupation on ordinary people. Acknowledging that he has given disproportionate weight to victims of violence, he seeks -- and finds -- a nation "counting backward" and "going down, down, down."

As they describe the "cleansing" of neighborhoods and murders based on mistaken identity or sectarian hatred, the narratives in "Voices From Iraq" are powerful, poignant and painful. The 6-year-old son of television reporter Khail Ibrahim Al-Nasir, we learn, identified the safe house of the terrorists who killed his schoolmates, put his family at risk and forced them to flee to Syria. Ali Ibrahim Baher, a graduate student, moved to Hit when his surroundings in Baghdad were overrun by Al Qaeda, only to hide in his apartment, with "blood pounding in his veins," fearing that the approaching Americans, whose vehicle had just been disabled by a bomb, would kick in the door and kill him. And Salma Hamid, a Sunni married to a Shi'ite merchant, searched the jails of Mahmudiya for her missing son, before finding him just outside of town, shot through the head, his tan slacks and bright shirt still clean.

"Voices From Iraq" ends with the reflections of Hassan Ali, a lifelong resident of Sadr City, who worked as a cook in the aftermath of the invasion, before becoming involved with charity organizations. Despite all the suffering he has witnessed, "all the explosions and all the murders every day for months," Ali believes that life in Iraq is better than it was under Saddam Hussein: Now no one spends nights fearing that "someone would be coming for you." Or that a neighbor, arrested by intelligence officers, was "being tortured, saying names to make the pain stop, maybe your name."

In time, Ali concludes, the Americans will leave, the curse will be lifted, the wounds will heal, the Iraqis will be free and the sacrifices will have been worthwhile. You are left to wonder whether his fellow citizens, especially those who were interviewed for this book, agree.
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.