

Let's Attack Iraq

Close your eyes and try and conjure up (if you are old enough to do this) a mental picture of the management consultant the 1960's and 70's. A little pin-striped number, regulation white shirt, sober tie, Church's shoes. Age about 55-60. Where did they all go? Were they victim of the recession before this, or was it the claret and the single malts?

Good gracious no! They're invading Iraq.

They might as well, because they've already done the rest of the Middle East several times over.

Hotel lobbies around the Gulf are littered with Jameses and Johns. They sit behind palm fronds and shake papers at one another. They have very, very nice suits and you just know they have been here for a long time, because when they get outside on the street they don't perspire like you and me.

I've been around these people a few times in my life and every time I get to the Middle East I am surprised at just how many there are. Worn-out looking ex-British management consultants (there are no Germans, French or Italians) who are involved in some seedy operation to keep some foreign flag flying over some piece of desert real estate. A lot of them seem to be in human resources; others do transport, distribution and security.

Engineering – as we have already heard from the world's media congregated in Baghdad – seems to be the carefully roped-off domain of the Billys and Chucks – large Americans from Kansas and Texas. They don't wear suits ever. And they don't perspire either. They just sweat! Hotel lobbies throughout the region are home from home to both of these groups of what we loosely call Western society. Chuck and Billy and their ilk splash loudly in over-chlorinated pools and drink a medley of non-alcoholic beer, euphemistically called "malt beverage". James and John sit a drink tea.

Ever since the "war" the massed ranks of consultants has been increasing daily in the five, then four, then three star establishments

throughout the Gulf. Rather like the build up of allied forces, these letter-day vultures and would-be carpetbaggers are massing for the final push toward Iraq. When they are allowed in by the glorious occupying (oops sorry!!!!, it's liberating, isn't it?) troops.

But while the young hot shots grumble with impatience the old boys, the hardened campaigners, sip their tea and swim their laps. They know that nothing in the Middle East moves that fast. And anyway, there's a whole country to rebuild and a lot of time to do it in (you think the money is arriving that fast?).

And this is why James and John and Chuck and Billy are content. They watch the youngsters on their mobile phones and lap-tops and they shake their heads. They have been here a long time and will still be here long after the others have folded their corporate tents and stolen off into the desert from whence they came.

You see it's all about age (oh and not being female either. Please don't send Ms Smith down here, it still doesn't work!). Look at it this way. First our good ole boys have staying power. They've been around this region a long time and they know what's what and who's who. The mere fact that they are still in business proves that they are still worth something. Second that age factor comes into play, big-time. Those grey tufts of hair that define James and John as much as their suits and ties, commands respect. And just as any young enthusiastic Arab manager has respect for his elders, so does he for them.

Their dealing with the local population have been and will be on a different level from those of the keen young things, who have advanced reservations at the Hotel Palestine. And, quite frankly, I have to say that it is nice to know that some things don't change that fast. So if you are pushing 50 and in danger of being pushed out, maybe the catch-phrase should be, "go East, old man." But make sure you dye your hair a nice distinguished grey before you go.