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See my 19 February interview with Mr. Reeker for background.

Abstract

We have to be keenly aware of Iraqis' reality, because their experience is the one that matters here. Ambassador Crocker stresses constantly how complicated this is, and Americans frequently lack a feel the empathy needed to comprehend others' situations. Ex-patriots, such as the Iraqi-Americans the US worked with in 2002 and 2003, have their own biases and agendas, and we have to be wary of them. In the run-up to the invasion, policymakers failed to entertain questions relevant to Iraq, the region, war, or the aftermath of an invasion. USMI is huge, but it is not all the State Department; all the cabinet level departments have representatives here, but it has been very difficult getting them to fill their positions here and in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. USMI is a drain on the State Department's resources, and especially on the Near East bureau and its Arabic speakers. Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus have a vital and effective partnership, but the military and the civilians here still struggle with a cultural divide, with different ways of approaching problems, and a "can do" attitude versus a more patient and possibly less expectant approach. The new Baghdad embassy is the largest in the world, due to 1) security, 2) living arrangements, and 3) recreation facilities. It has to be a completely self-sustaining. Whether that means Iraq deserves to have a preeminent place in US foreign policy for decades to come is an on-going policy debate. Was invading Iraq a mistake? That just opens up the endless what-ifs, but we can not forget the media's role in the incessant criticism of the Clinton administration in the 1990s for failing to deal with Saddam, and the retrospective angst of not having taken him out in 1991. All that contributed to the hue-and-cry of those who after 9/11 decided "once and for all" with Saddam.

Interview

Before we started the recording, you were just talking about the challenge of having time to think through issues.

I think it is an important point, especially for senior leaders, and all of us, is stepping back and thinking about what we're doing and reassessing it is important. In terms of my role, I try to, as the Counselor, as the title suggests, think 'big thoughts', and I think it is what Ambassador Crocker does so well. I think he spends a lot of time thinking big thoughts, and small ones too, constantly reassessing, taking little pieces of information

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and forming this mosaic about what is happening out here. Whether that is a new approach, it is certainly what has been needed at USMI and at MNFI.

Can you describe the elements of that mosaic?

2:10. I think you have to be keenly aware of the Iraqi reality, the situation as it is for the average Iraqi and the different ones with whom we have to deal, and those for whom this endeavor is so key. I think that was largely missing from the planning for this, because I don't think we had a grasp of the reality of what we were in for in Iraq, including the history of Iraq, what had happened in Iraq over the decades of Saddam's dictatorship and the regime. My understanding and knowledge of the period leading up to the war was that so much of our planning, or lack of planning, was informed and shaped by people who had not been to Iraq for generations, who had particular agendas, who had specific constructs for their view of Iraq, and it is vital to look at what constitutes this mixed and complex environment. That is what Ambassador Crocker repeats so often; Iraq is really hard, really complicated. Any society is, when you're going to take on an entire society, which is what we did.

3:57. With Ambassador Crocker, you have somebody who really has an enormous grasp of the history and the various things, whether it be religion, sect, tribe, culture, historical influences and perceptions, that shape everything we do, and he tries constantly to build upon that, and I'm reminded of one from just this week where the Iraqis begin to observe the 40th day after Ashura in the Shia calendar. Some senior western officials referred to Iraqis celebrating this event. Well, it is not a celebration, it is a trauma, and that is very sensitive, and the Ambassador made sure that we informed everyone that it was crucial not to talk about celebrating this day, but to talk about commemorating, or observing. So, [this is] a minor point, but one that was brought to his attention by many influential Iraqis.

5:36. This says something about the way I view Americans and our approach to the world. We're very good at sympathy. We're not necessarily good at empathy, and we're not necessarily good at understanding what freedom or democracy or some of this other things mean to others, or the prisms through which they see their reality is difficult and complex, and we need to give that a lot of thought.

On a closely related question to something you mentioned, expatriots, I've found often they are people who often have some deep-seated resentment against the society they've left. It is not merely that they've immigrated, but they tend to have something against where ever it is they've come from.

6:40. I think there is something there. These are people who left, for whatever reason, and . . . or their descendants in many cases, who have a particular vision of that country's history and what it should be. I've seen this many times in my experiences in the Balkans and eastern Europe and Hungary, and having some Hungarian ancestry myself. I've seen how Hungarian-American communities, and it is plural because there is no one Hungarian-American community, is shaped by their own perceptions of when they immigrated, late 19th, early 20th century, pre-World War I, had a certain approach. Of course, those who fled persecution as Jews, or fled the Holocaust, or those who fled in 1956 when the uprising was squashed, all have very different perceptions and feelings of

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Hungary and how the US should approach Hungary, and what US policy should be. It is an enormous challenge for diplomats, for people at embassies, because we're . . . these people are on us all the time to pursue their agenda, what they believe America's approach should be to a country, and the sovereignty of a country, [and] other perspectives on the history doesn't matter to them. That is just a factor in diplomacy, and for Iraq, there are elements of that, whether it is Iraqi-Americans or other Iraqis who have found their ability to influence certain American decisions and policy-makers over time. The press has written about this, to a degree. Whether it is Ahmad Chalabi or others, and the influence or the roll they played in the run up to and the early execution of the war and the post-conflict situation.

And then we find ourselves in the position of trying to figure out who we can turn to as interlocutors, and the ex-patriots seem an obvious answer.

9:15. Exactly. You know, we place great stock in citizenship, so if someone is an American, that is what they are [in our eyes]. I always found that to be a . . . a little ironic at times, just the way we do clearances, and who we engage in, somehow believing that being an American, having a passport, somehow makes you different from the day before when you didn't, and that truly is how we approach it. It discounts people's thinking, contexts, contacts, emotional reactions, agendas.

Do you know anything about a conference of ex-patriots in London in December 2002 and what it revealed about divisions among Iraqi ex-patriots?

10:50. I vaguely do recall something about a London conference.

It was not widely publicized but it was not a secret.

11:12. The outcome of it, I have no recollection, but it is not surprising that they could not agree. We're dealing with Iraqis and they come at it with a hundred different perspectives. Why that should be such a surprise and how difficult it is to move forward on the political and social issues when you have people from different tribes and different sects and so many historical perspectives.

So the historical problem is why could we not see the inability of anti-Saddamists to cooperate as a cautionary tale before we entered Iraq?

12:15. I think that is a very good question. My general understanding is that the quote "Future of Iraq" project under the Department of State, did approach this to a degree, although I think they tended to look at the more practical issues of what approaches to take and what would the challenges be to approaching different sectors. What will be the challenges. That of course was tossed aside by those who were given the job of planning the war itself, or the transition or occupation, the post-kinetic. The idea was, in certain circles, that ex-pats would come in and just resolve things, but then what you found was there was not much support among Iraqis for these expats.

It also seems to me that we did not learn from our experience with the Kurds in the mid-1990s, when one group turned against another, and wound up bringing

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Saddam in as an ally against the other. Why didn't we see what that meant, the certainty of groups struggling for power?

13:50. Well, Ambassador Crocker did and does, and makes these calls all the time. I mean right now, today, one of the big challenges today, is the Turkish invasion--the word is not too strong to use--in Iraqi Kurdistan and the potential that has for destabilizing not just Iraq as a whole, but the Kurdish regions and the divisions between the PDK and the PUK, about which I wouldn't not pretend to know much more than that, but Ambassador Crocker was discussing this with us this morning and the fault lines about what why this is so sensitive and our view . . . his view, that this Turkish business, that while fighting the PKK important, they're a terrorist organization and a common enemy and that this is dangerous, and it can have enormous repercussions. And we have been talking daily about communications, about what we don't say from this enemy, but watching the official GoI statements and how those might seem to play to Iraqis but upset Kurds within Iraq, and then the various reactions up in Kurdistan may upset the balance between the two main parties up there, and as far as I understand it, everything up in Kurdistan, as rosy as it may seem looking at it from down here, everything is divided between one side or the other, and there is sort of an uneasy truce. It is like two families, the Barzanis and the Talibanis, who control everything, kind of like the Sopranos. The whole mafia imagery is quite appropriate here, I find more and more.

One more pre-war planning issue: in 2002, IAD was still engaged in stability operations in Kosovo, and it was struggling with all the political, economic, diplomatic, and security problems of the region, and they realized they had inherited Milosevic's problems. And, they were also beginning to plan for operations in Iraq, and I found a slide that kind of thought ahead to Iraq in terms of what they were struggling with in Kosovo and that asked the question "What if we inherit Saddam's problems?" They had no answer, but I was impressed that they asked the question.

17:20. Yes, and various people did. I knew various people in the State Department who were well-informed enough to know what questions to ask, and as Ryan Crocker has said since, to know what questions they couldn't even begin to ask, because there were so many things, and he talks about it was the things he didn't know that kept him up at night. Like, who's going to pick up the garbage? How is that going to work? Who is going to run this, or run that? Just the enormity of the questions that any mayor or governor would understand a society that is already shattered, and then we're breaking the frame that is holding it together, and unfortunately, I don't think people were pursuing those questions, or they were told . . . you know, we're not going to worry about that. And, again the sort of approach to the Future of Iraq project and to the so-called 'Arabists' at the State Department and how they were treated, really shunted aside. Anybody that asked questions was somehow considered 'not on board.' Your patriotism could be questioned, and you could be told "get with the plan," and people could ask, "well, what is the plan?"

Now, what I intended to focus this interview on, what embassies have you served in and how is USMI different from the rest?

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19:10. I've have served formally in three, in Budapest, then Skopje, then back to DC, and back to Budapest, and now here. Given the nature of the jobs I've done, I've had short duties in other embassies.

I often have to struggle with the challenge of explaining this embassy to people back at the State Department. I have approached this embassy and doing public affairs and diplomacy for it as I approached doing it for the entire State Department. We have elements of everything here, of all the State Department's offices, except for geographic offices, like the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. The ambassador and his office need to be treated like the Secretary of State's office in terms of how we do paperwork, how we do clearances, and we really have the full spectrum of the interagency here, and just about every cabinet level department represented with staff on the ground: Health and Human Services, Energy, Transportation, Commerce, Treasury, Justice and its various elements (FBI, Marshall's Service), Homeland Security (Customs and Immigrations). Within our embassy structure,

23:15. Around the world, embassies today are platforms for US government activity far beyond the State Department. In fact, in most embassies now, I think it is fair to say that State Department people are outnumbered by personnel by other US executive branch departments. And that is a topic of great discussion. Some of it comes down to budgetary questions, where the State Department was funding management and overhead expenses that were supporting personnel from other departments. So they developed a cost-sharing arrangement to manage that among the departments. The relationship with DOD is typical in almost every embassy in that regard, but here it is a completely different ballgame. Bureaucratically, things can get quite complicated. We had good interagency cooperation in Budapest. In other places, I know there is more tension. I think it is good here, but interagency has been a struggle here at times, partly with the challenge of getting the departments to send personnel out here. That has taken intervention at the highest level. But they perform particular needs, and at the same time we're always keeping an eye on right-sizing, and this is in the context of a very difficult security environment.

Of course, all these federal employees did not sign up to serve abroad.

28:45 The State Department has been criticized severely for not "stepping up" to such things as the PRTs, but the State Department doesn't have the people for the PRTs. The skills needed for the PRTs come from Justice, Agriculture, and all those federal agencies whose employees do not expect to deploy. But where do you find the people you need. If you ask the PRT in Ninewa what they need, in consultation with local government, it is veterinarians and expertise in sheep husbandry. We don't have cadres of that in the Foreign Service; we are generalists. Ironically, the military does have a certain advantage with its Ready Reserve, of people it can call up.

But once you try to find qualified and willing people, then you have to get them on board, security, medical clearances, all of that. It is not an easy task, and the staffing levels are where they're supposed to be, and they will be for the next cycle. Unfortunately, in Washington, they're already looking at the next cycle. That is a challenge, a logistics

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challenge, that Ambassador Crocker has taken on to take up to the Secretary and the President.

How big is the Foreign Service element here, and what has this mission done to the State Department?

32:10. We have about [1.4a] FSOs at USMI, and the whole USMI has about [1.4a] people. I'm not sure where the military number meets the civilian number. I believe this is the largest embassy, largest number of State Department overall. I know anecdotally that this has put a strain on the Foreign Service, and on the State Department, and you feel it when you are back in the department. I left Washington in 2004, and I hadn't noticed it much, and I went to Budapest. But the calls began going out looking for people to volunteer for Baghdad, as well as Kabul, and other tough unaccompanied posts, like Saudi. Then the cuts started coming, and we lost two slots in Budapest. I felt it was appropriate. It meant you do more with less or the same with less, or you cut back what you do. I've noted there is this fatigue with Iraq and a certain resentment. I see it within the Near East bureau, which I don't know well, but their perspective is, "Look, we've got all these other things going on, the Mid-East Peace Process, other parts of the region, and yet Iraq is sucking up Arabic speakers, who are already in short supply, resources, and focus." And the human tendency is to see some resentment crop up. And there is a questioning of whether Crocker needs everything he keeps asking for. What positions we need are done very carefully.

What you had back in the CPA days, as it was portrayed to me, was sort of this Wild West atmosphere, "here you go, sign up, get you name in the hopper for a place at the trough," was how it was portrayed to me. And that is the image in the book *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*. I'm sure some of it is embellished, and I'm sure there were some people who came with good ideals.

35:30. What has concerned me is the horrible hit the State Department and the Foreign Service took with the perception that Foreign Service Officers weren't willing to serve and involuntary assignments. There was that thing in the fall where the Department "announced" the department might do involuntary assignments, with choices of resigning or coming here. But, people did sign up for it. But this emotional town hall meeting had a terrible appearance before the press. There was all the emotion about the policy and how we got to this position, which is not exclusive to the State Department; it involves the whole country. But the way it appeared in the press was that foreign service offices were just pin-stripped, cookie-pushing people who just want to live in comfy houses overseas aren't willing to step up and do this. It kind of bothered me personally, because like my military colleagues, I'm here, I'm doing it, and I don't think it was what the military guys wanted to do either, given a choice. But in a country where so little is known about the State Department, or the Foreign Service . . .

What do you mean?

38:10. When you try to get on an airplane and they ask for ID and they look at yours and say "Department of State, well, what state is that?" And you try to explain that it is the

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State Department, and they say, "Oh. Is that like Motor Vehicles?" That is just part of our national character and part of the State Department's poor public persona.

For most people, when they get here, they realize it is not as bad as they expected. Certainly, the way security has improved since August 2007 has made a palpable difference. Morale has improved dramatically, and a sharp decline in indirect fire.

Many generals have warned that Iraq is breaking the military. Is there anything comparable on the DoS side?

39:30. Is this mission breaking the State Department? You hear people saying that, that there has been this drain of resources to Iraq, that it has been difficult to staff other jobs. We have a finite number of officers and finite fiscal resources to do things worldwide. We started doing this, even before Iraq, people realized we were not appropriately postured, so we were already doing what Secretary Rice now calls Global Diplomatic Repositioning. We have to prioritize, and are undergoing global diplomatic re-posturing. For example, the political section in Norway had the same number of officers as the political section in New Delhi, a country of 1.1 billion people with this enormous economy. The State Department like so much of our country, including the military, is based so much on Cold War models, is based on a post-WWII national security architecture, and I do think one of the great lessons of this endeavor is this sort of working together of the civilian side with uniformed military. I think post-conflict situations are going to involve this more and more, and I think it is really important to understand our cultures more and more. I've tried even out here to have a couple of seminars or lectures on the basic of the US military and how it works, a battalion, a brigade, a division, and how ranks work, and vice versa, if we could get ourselves organized and deliver a lecture to the military of a couple of hours on how the State Department works and what it does, I think the military would be very interested.

42:10. In the Joint Campaign Plan, in how General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have approached this, we have four lines of operation, and MNFI has the security line in the lead, and on economic, political, and diplomatic, the embassy has the lead. Now they are so intertwined, and every thing is tied to the security . . . and Turkey, and Iran, and we have to constantly work on them. I sometimes can see my military colleagues shaking their heads wondering "What is wrong with these [State Department] people? Why are they so slow, and what is taking so long?" And on the Embassy side I see people shaking their heads at the military throwing 30 colonels at a problem, which is not going to solve it. So we have different cultures.

I'm confused about the new embassy in Baghdad. When I first heard about it in the United States, and then came and saw that it was true that we were building the largest embassy in the world here, I was flabbergasted. I didn't know if the decision-making process underlying it was just bureaucracy run amuck or if there was actually a thought process at the highest policy level that has rationally concluded that Baghdad should be the centerpiece of American foreign policy in the 21st century.

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44:00. It is a great question, and as we get ready to open it, I should be ready to answer it better. First, I think you have to put in perspective the fact that the original embassy plan was in fact larger, actually considerably larger, than the one we wound up with. Deputy Secretary Armitage, before I came out here, told me he slashed it from being larger. I think this was developed on a certain amount of planning, first how many positions. Now, the embassy of the 21st century is often, almost always, dictated by security. So, I imagine when they were first planning this they were imagining a security situation far better than what we have now or may have in the foreseeable future. The proponents of the war did not prepare for sectarian violence, and "cakewalks." Security is a problem, no matter where you are. If you build embassies outside of down town, then they are inaccessible; they're behind big walls that are blast resistant, but that is today's reality. Also, today, everyone is living on this embassy as well, which is not the case in Budapest and many places. And you have to have within these walls recreation facilities, and everything that you typically have in a military base anywhere in the world. Yes, it is the largest embassy in the world. It is also completely self-sufficient. Some people think that is outrageous, but the last thing Iraq needs is for us to be in an embassy that is sucking more power off their grid, and if we process our own waste water, I think that is a good thing. And security requires many different standards have to be met. With MNFI still here, the new embassy still doesn't have enough room. For awhile, people will have to double up in rooms before we have enough space. It is a 21st century embassy, constructed in a war zone. I don't think the problems are worse than what you'd see in any normal construction project. You find the problems, and you fix them.

Taking the same question from a different angle, as if you were at the State Department, and I asked you to explain why, for all the problems in the world, you've poured so many of your resources into Iraq, what would you say?

50:00. This is a debate we have, which shows it hasn't been fully debated. Is this country of 30 million people, given its location and its history, is it worth this resource allocation? Policy processes have determined that it is, but it is debated every year as budgets go forth, and in the presidential campaign. Those are policy questions on which any person can have a particular view. Some of the justifications for it talked about this being a platform for regional democratization and freedom. Maybe it will be. Maybe the nascent Republic of Iraq is doing important things, like provincial authorities and devolution from the center, that are new and remarkable and are actually happening. Iraq is already more democratic than just about any place else in the Middle East.

The end of the discussion concerned moral retrospection. Was this [invading Iraq] a mistake, and what good does it do to say that, because even if you say invading Iraq was a mistake, that still doesn't leave you with an obvious answer as to what do you do now?

56:30. I well remember going to the State Department podium in the Clinton Administration and getting beat up daily by reporters with the question of "What are you doing about Saddam Hussein?" "What are you doing about Iraq?" "Saddam is a threat." The WMD, the inspections, the suffering of the Iraqi people, were all out there, and the sanctions were "Swiss Cheese," as Secretary Powell said. It was corrupt, it was awful. For all those bad things now, they were all there then, and we got beat up for it daily with

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"Where was the leadership?" "What was the US position?" It would go back to "Why didn't you deal with Saddam in 1991? In 1992? In 1993? It was these historical arguments over and over again. People tend to forget.

In 2004, [REDACTED] (b)(6) brought out a book just damning the invasion, but in 1993 he had a book damning us for not taking out Saddam, and his 1993 work contributed to the genre of criticism that built up greater and greater demands to do something about Saddam.

58:50. And that was a constant refrain, and I remember we spent huge amount of time in the Clinton Administration, under Albright, going over the issues and highlighting the terrible things Saddam was doing, the abuses, the corruption, the palaces, children supposedly going hungry from sanctions when the regime was shipping in booze for the elites. That was a reality. I think the questions about this undertaking should be more about how it was done, and the media's role, and the sort of whys and wherefores of making WMD the point of it all. But we have to keep in mind that this was a problem, and we needed a way to deal with it. The same thing came up with Kosovo on a smaller scale. Had we not prosecuted the air war in '99, might we have negotiated? I think Milosevic might have cut a deal, and Serbia would be in a better position that they are in today vis-à-vis Kosovo, and he might still be there, in power, but that is speculative, that's history, but that doesn't erase the fact that it was an issue every single day. The same journalists who criticize us now were criticizing us then for "your policies aren't good, there is no force behind your rhetoric." People's perspectives are very short.

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