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### Abstract

A career FSO, Reeker encountered many frustrations in the run up to and aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in explaining US policy. After the invasion, he found many people who firmly opposed the invasion really wanted to engage the US over the issues, but he was thankful he was no longer a spokesperson when Abu Ghraib hit. Secretary Rumsfeld hurt the image of the United States abroad. In January '07, Crocker's request that Reeker come to Baghdad was unnerving. He was talked into saying yes. In June '07, he found the embassy's public affairs office completely dysfunctional. He received very good support assembling an effective team. The embassy PAO is small, and relies heavily on MNFI. Crocker appreciates media engagement, and he does it, but it is a chore rather than a forte. The embassy's PAO section is now well organized and active. The September '07 testimony restored credibility; the April '08 testimony needs to update where we are at politically, economically, and diplomatically, and the key remains Iraqi solutions to Iraqi problems. "Transformational" diplomacy, in Reeker's view, is not new; diplomats have long engaged host country issues with a view toward positive change. All decisions here are 'conditions-based.' It seems we could do more, but we do face the limits of time and resources. These notes are accurate, but not verbatim. For quotes, listen to the recording.

### Background

1:45. Reeker was the Deputy Spokesman for the State Department (DoS) from early 1999 until September '03, and then worked for Secretary Powell until the summer of '04 speaking about US foreign policy around the world. I observed various interagency processes. I recall clearly in early '03, when Deputy Secretary Mr. Armitage said that we were "handing [Iraq] off to DoD," and thenceforth, we would not provide the briefing on Iraq but would leave it to the Pentagon on the war. Obviously, it was a kinetic effort. I recall in December of '02, our guidance had long been that there had been no decision on military action. Then, Secretary Powell told me to stop saying that, and the implication was a decision had been made.

There was a Defense-led initiative. Then, they were looking for people to send to Iraq to join Garner's group. They compiled names to go. My assistant, a junior Presidential Management Fellow named (b)(6) asked to go, and she now works for my former boss, Assistant Secretary Richard. Boucher. They spent weeks in Kuwait, then spent the first couple of months up here in Baghdad with ORHA. I recall clearly that many DoS people who had experience with the region, who had been involved with the

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Future of Iraq project, like (b)(6) were excluded by the Defense Department, to my knowledge, from having anything to do with Iraq. Memos showed the experienced names were rejected, because DOD did not want experience participating. Thus, it became a Defense led operation, with State then handling public fall out and such. I places I traveled overseas, in Europe or Pakistan, or Southeast Asia, where I spoke at an Islamic university in 2004.

***First, let me ask a question on the immediate aftermath of the invasion. When Saddam fell, various sources suggest there was a window of opportunity to reengage diplomatically many countries that had opposed the invasion. Did you see indications of this?***

6:50. I recall that somewhat. There was a certain relief that the war was prosecuted rapidly and successfully. I recall my own relief that it seemed over quickly, and that it seemed to have been what it was touted to be--shock and awe, a speedy victory. As a broader reaction, no one likes more than to join a winner. On Afghanistan, it had been a more popular effort, and I recall a certain frustration in many areas after 9/11, when so many countries offered support to us, and that came through the State Department, and we weren't prepared or ready to accept that. We lacked a capacity to absorb what they offered, so it appeared to be a "go it alone" attitude. We spent a lot of capitol on building a coalition. I recall a period where it seemed the Iraqis had welcomed Saddam's demise, so that looked better internationally. But we left most of that to the White House and the DoD to deal with, from the stand point of communications.

9:50. In the traveling I did in 2004, and the failure to find WMD was an enormous difficulty in terms of trying to get beyond the war and talk about the war in context. That was a challenge wherever I spoke, be it in Australia or elsewhere. There was definitely a hunger all over the world for this kind of engagement. I was sort of unique because I was a State Department figure who had some public recognition . . . as the Deputy Spokesman, and there was a hunger to engage . . . and respect . . . and they were eager to hear, including young Muslims studying at this Wahhabi-funded institution in Malaysia. I felt then and I continue to feel that we did miss opportunities to engage our public diplomacy. I suspect it was caught up in our national security structure on what to say and how to engage these issues. There was a neuralgia around it that just continued to fester, and it became worse with the failure to find WMD. There was the looting of the museums of course that was more negative . . . and I remember my own great relief that Abu Ghraib emerged after I'd stopped this traveling. That would have made it pretty difficult.

***Secretary Rumsfeld really made himself the primary exponent of American policy throughout that period, which I consider to have been to the detriment of U.S. interests.***

12:40. He became . . . he was sort of . . . not my phrase, but "The Rummy Show." It was widely mocked, and source of fascination by the media, who were quite sucked into have the Secretary of Defense come down to the briefing room. His own spokesperson, Torrie Clark, sort of stepped aside, and no longer had a role. He was . . . the talk of a 'rock star,' or older kind of . . . words like 'stud' were being used. And he really ran the show. And overseas, that really did cause resentments, because he wasn't a popular character, and he

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came across as an arrogant, not listening, and his sayings that will echo with us forever, like "stuff happens" . . . the various . . . glib responses he gave. Certainly from a public diplomacy standpoint, and I guess that is my field, were very unhelpful.

***I also thought then that, that with all this time he is spending in front of the cameras, he really ought to be figuring out some solutions.***

14:30. Well, that was the story that one was hearing. Now I was not in high-level policy meetings, but the story was that he sort of 'checked out' of the war. He checked the box, and moved on, and focused on other things. And again, its not the State Department's business per se, but the issues of numbers of troops and the logistics, and armaments and the things that were happening as the endeavor began to go south, it was true, where was the leadership, and who was making the decisions. It was kind of a plan . . . and this resonates now several years later . . . it [I think he means quick, efficient "Transformational" war] was an idea developed in various think tanks . . . and rammed down the reality of Iraq, which nobody understood.

16:00. So I go off to Budapest in August '04, and then Iraq had little resonance with my day to day existence there. I was there until the beginning of April '07. I had already agreed to go work with Ambassador Crocker in Pakistan in the summer of '07. But he called me in January '07 and said the plans had changed and he wanted me to come with him to Baghdad. This created a certain amount of personal anguish. I lacked information on what it was like or an impression of how dangerous it was. I had been in Macedonia in '99 in the Skopje embassy when mobs overran the embassy, the day after the bombing of Serbia began, March 23 of '99, I think that was the day. I had been working with Ambassador Chris Hill in Belgrade, and we had left there at the last minute after the negotiations over Kosovo had failed. The war started, and the next day, the embassy was overrun by a stone-throwing mob. We took refuge in the vault in the basement until we were rescued by the Macedonian police.

18:30. In January '07, Crocker emailed me asking that we (my wife and I together, since she is also in the foreign service) do this together. That began the period of anguish until I agreed to do with, with additional 'encouragement' from others in the department. It was not easy for our families to deal with this. By February '07, I had agreed to come. I had traveled to Amman to meet with (b)(6) and Public Affairs officers from the PRT teams in Iraq. The Undersecretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy, (b)(6) was there. We spoke, I returned to Budapest, and agreed to go.

20:00. I headed back to the states in early April, had some leave, then did training and consultations and came out here in early June. The 1st day, Ambassador Crocker and I sat down to talk. I did not know him well, but we had spend some time working together when he was at the Near East bureau. He had a couple of major priorities in my lane, the communications lane. One was establishing the relationship with MNFI, in the communications lane. There had apparently been no relationship between the embassy's public affairs operation and the MNF, very little contact, which was clearly not healthy. So that was a major thing to focus on. Second was dealing with Washington and the State Department public affairs and the Near East bureau, which wasn't that involved, but

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also with the interagency, the NSC, and the White House, DOD. That was key. Third was establishing some relationships with the Iraqis, their spokespeople. And fourth was establishing a better relationship with the press, the western and the pan-Arab media, because over the last several months, the embassy had really suffered from a lack of staffing. The public affairs section, for both the cultural affairs side as well as the press and information office, which is really the focal point, had kind of imploded. They'd lost the PAO I think in November or December of 2006. My formal predecessor had left either in November or December of 2006. He had no successor. The spokesperson, Lou Fenter, was here, had spent time in Afghanistan with Khalizad. I knew him from Washington. There was an information officer, and they tried to keep things going. As I understand it, and I can only speak from what I've heard, but they had very little support from the Embassy from the front office. Khalizad did much of his own media; coordinated, sometimes with Washington, with State PA, sometimes not. And there was little contact with or linkage with MNF. I had been lucky to have time to wrap up in Budapest, take home leave, have consultations. A friend and colleague left for a couple of months from the embassy in Ankara and came here to help get things ordered. The staff here, which was of mixed quality, had a couple of foreign service people, a lot of these 3161s, accepted service contractors, although they don't like that term, and others were here. There was a certain amount of trauma due to the security situation, the IDF. There was a dysfunctional process for public affairs. That was the focus, and I had great support from Crocker, who will tell you that he does not like doing a lot of press, but he recognizes the importance of it.

***What do you mean when you say a "dysfunctional process?"***

25:15. It was sort of an ad hoc thing, there were stories of duty officers in the press office, how they were taking calls at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning from journalists, there were no good structures for how the press interacted with the embassy, no formal processes for getting information or arranging briefings. It was just . . . really not a good situation, and the web site, for instance, which is an important tool for communications these days, had languished because we'd our local web master had left, and all our local staff, the Iraqi foreign service national staff, who are key in any embassy, the foreign service nationals are so key, particularly in your public affairs and public diplomacy operations. We'd lost almost all of them due to threats or in some cases people who were killed. So there was no continuity, there were no Arabic speakers, and I myself am not an Arabic speaker. I made that very clear to Ambassador Crocker as I tried to convince him that he had gotten the wrong guy [for the job]. We began building it back together. I got new members of the team, an Arabic speaker came as the information officer, does not have a press or public affairs background; he is an econ officer, and set to work. The deputy information officer is (b)(6) an Arabic speaker with some press background. Then the new Embassy spokesperson came, Mrembe Nantango, arrived. She had been the Public Affairs Officer in Doha, in Qatar, speaks excellent Arabic. We were able to again engage the Arabic press, and it has been successful, though still difficult to see people, to get out due to security, but it is better. Nantango is a career FSO. We are a great multicultural nation. She is ½ Dutch, ½ Uganda, educated in the UK, and is a naturalized American. Her Arabic is excellent, everyone tells me. She has a wonderful British accent, at least in the English, and that compliments Ambassador Crocker, who is

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a fluent Arabic speaker, and I understand it is a very complex language, obviously, although it has many dialects. Mrembe's capability means we can do press briefings in Arabic, and I think she is the first to be able to do that at the embassy. It is not the be all and end all, but that is very important at the embassy to be able to engage the public diplomacy angle.

***Does the embassy promote after-hours Arabic language training for the staff?***

30:00. It is normal for embassies to do language training in the host language, but that has been difficult here, and there is currently nothing going on in that area. This place is unique in having no after hours. Everybody works at all hours, 7 days. The embassy has tried to hire language instructors, and it is on the books, but it is the issue of priorities and what can you accomplish. For myself, there are so many competing priorities, and if I can get through my email, then I'm happy.

I arrived on 6 June 2007. We were undergoing daily IDF, rockets and mortars into the Green Zone. Surprisingly, I expected to be far more unnerved by IDF, or scared of it. It has been interesting to me in my own self analysis. I don't spend too much time on that type of thing, but I think it is that I spend of my waking hours in my office, where we are sitting, which is deep within the walls of the palace, so there is little chance of that kind of IDF hitting here. In the trailer, or hooch, my wife and I have keyed on probability theory; the chance of a direct hit is very small, and the sandbags provide protection from the surrounding area. I suspect the probability of being hit or killed on the beltway around Washington is greater than the risk of getting hit here in the Green Zone.

34:00. Still, I have to take account of others' trauma with the situation, and some who had already been here when we arrived, had been traumatized by the experience. I think it is not just IDF, but being inside these walls and knowing what is going on outside the walls. I have staff at the chancery building, where they've had more IDF. I had one staffer tell me she could not go back there, and she had only a few weeks left. Since September, there was a virtual cessation of IDF in the IZ, and I've seen a change in the morale. But we still have huge turnover as well, with people on one-year tours. But those who have not been here don't know what to think of the danger or the risk.

35:45. Our embassy operation is very small compared to the MNFI's Strategic Effects under Maj Gen Bergner and RADM Smith and their Communications Division. Bergner is my counterpart. We work incredibly closely together. We could not do what we do without the MNF. We rely completely on the CPIC, which has all the bells and whistles and the satellite links, translation equipment. It is over at Ocean Cliffs, in an old parking garage, which I think belonged to the Convention Center, and is near the Al Rashid. Also, the MOC with its 100s of people, they have lots of people, and they're good friends and people who make things happen, and colonels, and I think we bring an important civilian voice to explain what we're doing. This has only been possible to do all this because of the Crocker-Petraeus partnership. They have to set the tone, and they both instructed their people to do that. Crocker told me it was a priority. They have sent an LNO who sits in my office, who explains to MNF and us what each does. Our MNFI LNO is (b)(3), (b)(6) and it was (b)(3), (b)(6) who has since left the Navy and

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now works at the PAO at the Bureau of Near East Affairs in DC. We have a second Navy Commander, (b)(3), (b)(6) who has joined us and is focused on the PRTs.

***I'm impressed with how GEN Petraeus keeps focusing on the message and reminding the force and the staff every chance he gets what is the message we are trying to convey. How does Ambassador Crocker communicate his message to the staff?***

40:00. We have a Daily Update meeting with the senior staff, and a Sunday country team meeting, which is more broadly open, in which he talks through where we are and where we're going. We help convey his message, somewhat through the press. His transcripts are vital, and I've always thought that. There is nothing better, as I've seen from Secretary Albright or Powell, saying "As the secretary said", but using his words and his message. I get guidance from him, and it may be a unity of message on Iran and Iran-Iraq-US trilateral talks. He watches the press closely, and raises things. Early on, we had a good understanding of what we should do, and on a monthly basis we go over what press we should do. He is not fond of doing it, and his schedule is absolutely jammed, but he has never turned me down on [media engagements] because he knows they're important. That has been important.

42:28. Before I left Budapest, I went to Wagner's The Ring, and then I mentally divided twelve months here into four acts--based on the opera. The first act was the crucial period from June '07 to the testimony of September. This was unprecedented, testimony not by the Secretaries of State and Defense, but by this career ambassador and a career general, and doing the media, and the messages, and maintaining the credibility of these two men. The biggest challenge was that, from a public affairs and public diplomacy standpoint, there was no credibility. The administration and all of its spokespeople on Iraq had pretty much lost credibility. The press was cynical. Just talking to the journalists on the ground here were having a very difficult time with their editors. Anything the embassy said, the editors' response was "We're not going to take that Bush administration spin." So credibility was key, and maintaining independence, so the ambassador and the general both had to be able to say that this testimony is "mine and mine alone." They were giving their assessments based on their observations, and that was all they could do, to call it as they saw it. There were plenty of doubters, but this was the ambassador's view, and he did not sugar-coat things. He said it is hard, there is improvement, but the slope is very small. The press recently noted that Crocker is not known for sugar-coating anything. So it has been a great experience professionally to watch and work for him, and maintain that credibility, which requires restraint to avoid overexposure and choosing carefully which outlets you use.

46:00. So we got through the first act. We came back, after visiting London, talking to the British government, and talking to the pan-Arab media based there. A couple of areas we focused on was the PRTs, because they're vitally important. They give us presence and a sense of what is happening there, and they need a public relations element to communicate what is happening. We have a regional embassy office in Basra, embedded on the air base. We needed a public diplomacy officer down there, and there has not been one there since 2005. The need is there, and we are getting someone to go down

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there. So, I created a separate office here, the Provincial Support Unit, to draw resources from here to make them available to the PRTs, but also to pull feedback back from the PRTs to here, and to get that to the White House, and into the US media. It is not easy to do.

49:30. It is a fact that it is easier to put guys in uniform on US domestic TV than it is to put guys in bad suits on TV, who are diplomats, but people don't know what they do. That is a unique thing about this mission. No other embassy in the world does as much public affairs as we do. We do two conference calls a week, do backgrounders, interviews with the ambassador. We do an awful lot of press.

***What do you think Ambassador Crocker hopes or needs to achieve in the April testimony?***

50:50. I think the April one, he needs to give an update of where we've come since September. It is obvious to me, and I just spent a month in the states for R & R, mostly consultations in Washington, that . . . for many in the states, whether public, media, or Congress, they have not moved beyond the September testimony. September was a great success in terms of making the case that we finally knew what we were doing, both for the security plan and it began to show credibility was key, for what we've done in the political surge and engaging. There has been an ironic tendency in this effort to point the finger of blame at the State Department for the absence of success in Iraq. I would argue that the State Department, in a real and meaningful way as the career foreign service [who knew what was happening and what was required], really only established itself here under Crocker. This is now almost a mini-State Department, because we have so many non-State agencies here. Then we have this enormous MNFI. Normally, the Defense Attache is small, relatively. Here, the Defense Attache's Office is 170,000 strong. That is not to subordinate MNFI, but this is a unique mission. In April, the ambassador needs to show where we are politically, economically, and diplomatically. He has to show the progress, within the context of difficulties and challenges, and address Americans' demands for quick results. These things take time. The violence is down, the security is better, but learning to govern is difficult and it takes time. This has been fascinating to watch Iraqi progress. One of the key messages, I think he would be the first to say it, is that this is about Iraqi solutions to Iraqi problems. We can't do it, and our theories can't fix Iraqi realities. We can cajole and encourage and support with all kinds of programs for funding and capacity building, for assistance programs, expertise, but ultimately they have to do it themselves. And that is a changed way of thinking. It is a sovereign country. That was a decision made by the president, that we would swiftly establish a constitution and sovereign government.

***Does the Foreign Service face a dilemma in trying to represent the United States versus trying to change other countries with nation building?***

56:39. This is the difficulty of the so-called "Transformational" diplomacy. There is less of one that some may feel. In my experience, in 16 years, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, we are very much a part of change through programs and influence. We're sometimes disappointed. I applaud the concept, but I think we were doing some of this stuff before. Maybe that is underestimated, or goes against the conventional wisdom of

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diplomats just sitting around European salons in pinstripes eating cookies. We have to remember we don't run the show anywhere, but we have a major role in transforming things. Out here, we help with that, but we can't impose on a society or a country our vision of reality. The lesson learned is when you take on or engage an entire society, there is just a heck of a lot to think about. Who is going to pick up the garbage? Down to, if the security situation is tough, and you want diplomats fixing things, you've got to protect them. The military doesn't have the assets to do personal protection, nor does State, so you have to contract it. That led to Blackwater. . . [skipping much here, just discussion of how PSCs came about, without specific reference to the subsequent problems]. That is a reality.

1:01. It is about getting it right, and everything here is "conditions based," from staffing, to everything else. What can you do, constant reassessments. But it is new. There are a slew of other issues. I've seen the resentment in the State Department and what it has meant, the drawdown of resources in other departments, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, the sort of fatigue and malaise with which the department and the whole American public approaches the problem of Iraq. All these have an effect, but I do think, in the last nine months, that I've seen a real transformation here in how we operate, and what we're doing. One of the frustrating things is realizing how many more things we could be doing still, but you're just sort of limited by time and resources.

***We'll wrap up there, and continue another time.***

1:02:40. Good. That will be good.

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