

Southtown Article #23 How Long in Iraq?

I've been in country for about 10 months now. I've watched, listen to soldiers, spoken with Iraqis and learned more about their culture and customs than I ever imagined. The questions that come to my mind each and every day is, "What were the assumptions that brought us to Iraq and how long should we be here?"

On one hand there is talk of setting a deadline for the withdrawal of troops. On the other hand, the message from President Bush remains the same. We will stay here as long as it takes. What really is the best course of action?

An Iraqi interpreter who works at Abu Gharib detention facility made a chilling yet insightful remark. "Peace from terrorism is not for our generation. Maybe if we are lucky, our children will know peace."

I do not think we have much of an understanding of the Arab mindset. As Americans we are practical pragmatists. If there's a problem we want to fix it. And so we entered Iraq thinking we could quickly and easily "fix" the evil regime of Sadaam Hussein by replacing him.

We also assume that the notion of democracy is so compelling that of course; anyone offered a chance to live in a true democracy will jump at the opportunity to do so. And now we are scratching our heads wondering why things aren't going as planned here in Iraq.

An additional misconception that insurgents would love for the world to believe is that this is a jihad, a holy war. Their strength lies in getting people to believe this is about Muslims overthrowing the occupying foreign "infidels." This is not a war of Islam against Christianity. This is not even primarily a war of coalition forces against Iraqi Muslim extremists.

This is a war about power. Who is going to control Iraq? Who is going to control the vast wealth of its natural resources? For well over a year now, Muslims have been killing Muslims at a far greater pace than they have been killing Americans or other Coalition forces. It is easy for insurgents to whip up an emotional frenzy among their followers as they justify killing these invading infidels. But actions speak louder than words.

It wasn't too long ago when a suicide bomber drove into a large group of children. An American soldier was passing out gifts to the kids. The driver detonated his bomb and killed the soldier and about 30 children. Does the intentional murder of innocent Muslim children sound like the actions of a just holy war?

Every day with rare exception, we hear stories of Iraqis being killed by car bombs or small arms fire. They are being killed by fellow Muslims.

So what do we do? If we were to pull out on a massive scale now I have no doubt there would be genocide of epic proportions. Hundreds of thousands if not millions of Iraqis would be killed in the ensuing power struggle.

Because the United States and Coalition forces chose to remove Sadaam Hussein, we have altered the balance of power in Iraq. We are now morally obligated to help. But this help cannot be “us” fixing “them” or “their country.” The best we can hope to do is help them to help themselves and then slowly pull out.

We cannot force democracy onto the people of Iraq. As much as we believe in it with every fiber of our being, that is us, not them. The people of Iraq have been subjugated for 35 years under Sadaam Hussein. They understand the politics of fear. They do not understand the politics of freedom.

Will they come to a profound understanding and appreciation for the beauty, if not messiness, of democracy? I hope and pray they do. But it will not happen overnight and it may not happen at all. The only thing most Iraqi's know is brutal repression, fear, and murder on the part of their government. How long will it take them to unlearn the tragic lessons of the past? How will they ever trust enough to fully engage a democratic system of government?

The United States and Coalition countries still have important work to do here in Iraq. We have to stabilize the country through its democratic infancy. They have to approve a constitution. A freely elected government must follow. Iraqi Armed Forces and police must be trained. And then we must slowly but surely pull out.

It will be ugly. Insurgents will view our leaving as their victory. But the good people and the freely elected government of Iraq will have to fight these terrorists. And they will have to fight to the death.

But this has to be their fight, not ours. They will have to be willing to die for freedom if they ever hope to live as free men and women. Lasting democracy must be grasped from the grass roots and not imposed by someone else.

Although many good things happen here each and every day expect the news to mostly be bad for the coming years. Rebuilding Iraq will occur in fits and starts and there will be many setbacks. Centuries of tribal hatred and suspicion will not disappear overnight. The terrorist will continue to fight because if they lose, they will lose everything. It will take a long time for this country to recover.

I think the words of the Iraqi interpreter will ring true decades from now. Hopefully, the next generation will know peace.