

Interview

Office of the Spokesman

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Ambassador John Negroponte on Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace

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MR. WALLACE: Mr. Ambassador, welcome. Thanks for talking with us.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Thank you.

MR. WALLACE: What do you expect from the insurgents, the terrorists, in this last week before the election? Some are talking about the possibility of a rolling Tet offensive to try to break the will of the Iraqis and of the American public here at home.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, certainly, the insurgents and the al-Qaida and Zarqawi have all said that they want to do their utmost to try and disrupt the elections, but security measures are being taken by both the MNF, the multinational forces here in Iraq, as well as the Iraqi armed forces and police. They have elaborate security plans that go all the way down to the district level here in this country. And I would expect that we can see strong -- we will see strong participation by Iraqi voters in the northern and southern parts of this country and there be some problematic areas, particularly in the center, in the Sunni Triangle, especially the provinces of Al-Anbar and Nineveh. But even there, great efforts are being made to enable every Iraqi eligible to do so to be able to vote.

MR. WALLACE: Well, let me ask you about that, Mr. Ambassador, and let's talk specifically about election day. Iraqi and American military officials say that four of the country's 18 provinces that have 40 percent of the population may be unsafe for voters. Do you expect next Sunday, election day, do you expect attacks on polling places, and can you guarantee that anyone who wants to vote will be able to do so safely?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I don't think there's any such thing in Iraq, particularly under present circumstances, as an absolute guarantee. But what I can tell you is that there are elaborate plans, that security measures are being taken by both the multinational forces and the Iraqi armed forces and police, and that I think in large parts of the country, the preponderance of the country, it will be safe for people to go and vote.

Secondly, I think it's important to focus on the significance of these elections: What's at stake here? The Iraqi people will be voting for a National Assembly of 275 persons and that assembly, in turn, will select a new government, the first elected government, because the present one is appointed, and it will turn its attention then to drafting a new constitution to shape the political future of the country.

So these are really very exciting moments in the political history of Iraq and we detect a great deal of enthusiasm for them.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, I want to get to the election and what is going to spring from that in a moment, but during the Condoleezza Rice's confirmation hearings this week, there was a discussion about Iraqi -- the Iraqi military, the state of their readiness, particularly because the Iraqi military will play the lead role in protection at the polling places next Sunday. Now, she and Senator Joe Biden of Delaware disagreed sharply about how many Iraqi troops have been adequately trained. Let's watch that exchange, if we can:

Dr. Rice: "We think the number right now is somewhere over 120,000."

Senator Biden: "I think you'll find, if you speak to the folks on the ground, they don't think there's more than 4,000 actually trained Iraqi forces."

Mr. Ambassador, how can there be such a wide gap in what U.S. military officials are saying, between 4,000 and 120,000?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, with all due respect for my friend, Senator Biden, I think he very much understates the level of training and readiness of the Iraqi armed forces. Certainly, there is still a long way to go, but if you look at their performance in the past six months, I think you will see that there's been steady progress. There are towns, such as Najaf and Samarra and others, Al-Sadr City, here in eastern Baghdad, where the Iraqi security forces did not have any kind of a handle on the situation last April and now they're in good control. So there is steady progress. There is, of course, much more to be done. But I think Senator Biden's figures understate the level of preparedness of the Iraqi armed forces.

MR. WALLACE: I want to talk about this, that much more needs to be done. As we reported just a moment ago, General Luck came back from his fact-finding trip to Iraq and has reportedly recommended a big ramp-up in the training of Iraqi security forces. I guess I really have two questions. First of all, why wasn't that done a lot sooner? And secondly, how long will it take before they are able to achieve the stated goal, which is to have the Iraqis leading the fight against the insurgency and not U.S. forces? Three months, six months, a year? How long?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, your first question about why wasn't more done, when I first got here in the beginning of July, one of my first mandates was to review our assistance program and the allocations in that program, and I recommended after about

six weeks of study the reprogramming of \$1.8 billion from our reconstruction program to further train and equip the Iraqi armed forces. And as I said at my own Senate confirmation hearings, I can think of no higher priority than the enabling of the Iraqi armed forces and their police forces so that they can take on greater and greater responsibility for the security of their country.

MR. WALLACE: But, Mr. Ambassador, you were talking about that so many months ago. Why is it that General Luck now, after a fact-finding trip, is talking about doubling or tripling the number of American trainers?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, as I said, we recommended \$1.8 billion reprogramming and that reprogramming was undertaken, so that's not exactly an insignificant sum of money, nor does it represent an insignificant effort. I would say that General Petraeus has been working very hard, very intensively, to improve the quality and numbers of the Iraqi armed forces.

I don't want to prejudge or second-guess what General Luck is going to report to Secretary Rumsfeld. After all, he hasn't reported yet. He'll do that this coming week. But if he recommends intensive -- intensified training, even further intensified training, well, we'll have to consider that. And I think the more that can be done in this area, the better, in terms of enabling the Iraqis to take on greater, and ultimately complete, responsibility, for security in their country.

MR. WALLACE: And how long will that take? Are we talking months, years?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I'm most reluctant to put a time frame on that. We've shied away from doing that. But I would say that a certain amount of progress has been made so far. They've stood up something on the order of 70 army and national guard battalions. They've stood up a number of police commando battalions. Things are getting better.

MR. WALLACE: Let's talk about the elections because, as you said, it is a very exciting time. There seems to be a tremendous commitment to this elections among the Shiites and the Kurds, and the head of the slate most likely to finish first next week is Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, who has close ties to Iran.

Mr. Ambassador, how confident are you that he will run an inclusive government with a clear role for the Sunnis and that the clerics won't end up running the country?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, I don't think we can really forecast what the exact political coloration of the new National Assembly will be. As you know, there's more than a hundred different slates that are competing in this election. Now, it is true that there are three or four frontrunners, if you will, but even there, I don't think that any group is going to necessarily win a majority and there's certainly not going to be any monolithic party that is going to dominate this new National Assembly.

So I think it's premature to judge either who's going to win the most seats or who will form the new government, but I suspect it's going to represent a mixture of parties along a fairly broad spectrum of Iraqi politics.

MR. WALLACE: Leaders of the various Shiite groups, and even Prime Minister Allawi, have promised voters that once these elections take place and a new government is formed, that they will press for a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. I'm trying to understand the nature of our relationship with this new government. If they call for a withdrawal of troops, or, let's say, the beginning of the withdrawal of troops in, let's say, three months, will we do that?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, our presence here, the mandate for the multinational forces, is covered by Security Council Resolution 1546, and it talks about the terms of reference and the timetable for those forces. Our focus in our discussion with the Iraqi Government up until now has been on how to improve the training, equipping of the Iraqi armed forces. And, obviously, the sooner that we're able to do that, the easier it will be to reduce the involvement of our own forces in combat.

I think that most Iraqis would prefer that security responsibility, and the entire responsibility for security for their country, be in the hands of Iraqis themselves, and we share that goal with the people and the Government of Iraq. But the precise timetable, I think, is very hard to judge at this point, but I think the ultimate goal is one that we all share.

MR. WALLACE: What I guess I'm trying to get at, Mr. Ambassador, is that I don't have to tell you, certainly, that more than 1,300 Americans have been killed in Iraq. Does the U.S. have an obligation to do what the new government asks, or do we have our own independent security interests in Iraq?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, that's why I referred you, Chris, to Resolution 1546. It says that the multinational force shall be in Iraq for the duration of the political process that culminates in elections at the end of this year, but that the mandate could be ended earlier, if requested, by the Government of Iraq. So that's in a Security Council resolution that the United States voted for.

But I believe the reality of the situation is that we and most Iraqis agree that what ought to drive this question is not some kind of an artificial timetable, but the issue of whether or not the Iraqi army and police and other security forces are fully able to take charge of security in their country. And when you get down to talking about this issue with Iraqi political leaders, that's where most of them come out.

MR. WALLACE: Finally, Mr. Ambassador, I'd like to ask you about the Sunnis, who, obviously, as you pointed out, live in the area where there is the greatest violence and probably the greatest threat to voting on election day. Give us a benchmark, or at least a

sense, if you will, what is the minimum turnout that you need to see in Sunni areas in the country for this election to be considered legitimate?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I don't think that we should allow the question of Sunni turnout to be the arbiter, if you will, of the legitimacy of this election. What about the aspirations of the other ethnic and religious groups in this country or the non-sectarian politicians? So I think we have to be very careful about that. And to me, the important thing is the fact that the election will be taking place and I suspect there will be very wide participation.

Now, we'd like to see as much voting take place in the Sunni areas as possible. We're taking security measures to ensure that that happens. And also, there are a lot of people here thinking about how to reach out to the various Sunni elements in the post-election phase when there will, after all, be a tripartite presidency formed, there will be a cabinet to be selected and a constitution to be drafted, followed by a referendum on that constitution and, finally, by elections for a definitive government in December. So there will be many future opportunities for people to participate who might not participate in the election that is coming up next Sunday.

MR. WALLACE: Ambassador Negroponte, we're going to have to leave it there. We want to thank you so much for being with us, and good luck over the next week.

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