

Interview

Office of the Spokesman

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Ambassador John Negroponte on NBC's Meet The Press With Tim Russert

(10:30 a.m. EST)

MR. RUSSERT: But first, joining us now from Baghdad is the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, John Negroponte.

Mr. Ambassador, one week from today, the Iraqis will vote in a free election. Fourteen million are eligible to vote. How many do you expect to actually show up at the polls?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that remains to be seen. I think we expect a good turnout in the northern part of the country and in the south. There may be a couple of problematic provinces in the center. But in at least 14 out of the 18 governates in Iraq, I think we can expect a very strong turnout.

MR. RUSSERT: But if a sizeable minority boycott the election, how will it be seen by the world?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that, first of all, all the polling data and all our contacts and discussions with Iraqi political figures suggest that the large majority of Iraqi people, including Sunnis, wish to exercise their right to vote.

So the important thing is security, and we are doing our utmost to work with the Iraqi armed forces and their police to make sure that the necessary security measures are in place so that every Iraqi eligible to do so can exercise his or her right to vote.

MR. RUSSERT: These are the stories that have been read across the United States and around the world about the security situation regarding voting and campaigning in Iraq: "Guerillas have stepped up their attacks and driven most candidates deep indoors, a result, in large swaths of the country, it is a campaign in the shadows, where candidates are often too terrified to say their names instead of holding rallies. They meet voters in secret if they meet them at all. Instead of canvassing for votes, they fend off death threats.

As you well know, Mr. Ambassador, many Iraqis still don't know where the voting booths

are going to be because of security concerns. How can you hold an election in that environment?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: I just got off the telephone with General Casey, the commander of the multinational force, who has been visiting three provinces in the south, where he assures me that the security measures are very well in hand and in place; and that the expectation is that there will be large voter participation. So I think rather than just focusing on some of the problematic areas, I think one has to look at the country as a whole, and the situation in its overall context.

And in that -- looking at it in that vein, I think we can expect strong participation by the people of Iraq in an election that they really want, and which will mark a transition from an appointed to an elected government.

MR. RUSSERT: The CIA and other intelligence agencies have done analysis for our government leaders. This is how *The Miami Herald* reported its contents: "New U.S. intelligence assessments on Iraq paint a grim picture of the road ahead, and conclude there is little likelihood that President Bush's goals can be attained in the near future. Instead of stabilizing the country, national elections January 30 are likely to be followed by more violence, and could provoke a civil war between majority Shiite Muslims and minority Sunni Muslims, the CIA and other intelligence agencies predict."

What's your reaction?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I -- first of all, I simply don't subscribe to that prediction. Secondly, I would say that most Iraqis, including Iraqis of all ethnicities and religious persuasions want their country to move forward in a peaceful, democratic fashion.

We're already seeing signs that the various groups and parties that are participating in the elections want to reach out in a hand -- to extend a hand of friendship to the other parties after the election. People talk a lot about participation and consensus. And I think even with respect to the Sunni areas, a lot of people are thinking about if, indeed, they are underrepresented in the national assembly, might there be other ways to involve them in the political process?

There will be a three-person presidency. There will be a new cabinet. And of course, there will be the drafting of a constitution. So I think people here are looking at ways to include all elements of Iraqi society in these very, very important future political steps.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you expect a newly elected Iraqi Government would set a specific timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: I don't know whether it would do that. The presence of United States forces and the multinational force is mandated by a Security Council

resolution, which says that our forces will be here during -- for the duration of the political process. But the nature and extent of our military presence is always something that we're open to discussing with the Iraqi governmental authorities.

MR. RUSSERT: But if they set a specific timetable, would we honor it?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, we are here at the invitation of the Iraqis. And we are here in complete respect for their sovereignty. But you are asking a hypothetical question, and I wouldn't want anything I say to be construed as predicting whether or not that might actually happen.

MR. RUSSERT: How large is the insurgency?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I can say -- I don't think anybody knows with absolute certainty how large it is. We've heard varying estimates. But I can say that since I have been here, over the past six months, I think the level of military activity and the level of incidents instigated by the insurgency has remained roughly the same.

MR. RUSSERT: How could an insurgency of that magnitude exist without support, significant support, from the populace?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, it may have popular support in some areas, but what I would submit to you is that core of this insurgency are ruthless, Saddamist, former regime elements, who are aided and abetted by al-Qaida and other international terrorists.

I don't think they care that much about popular support. They use terror as a tactic both against the enemy and against the populace from whom -- upon whom they depend for support.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Joe Biden, Delaware Democrat, said this week in Washington that there are only 4,000 fully trained and capable Iraqi soldiers in the Iraqi armed forces. Is that accurate?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that really understates the accomplishments of the Iraqi army and police forces. They've had a number of successes in the past several months in Najaf, in Samara, in eastern Baghdad. There's some 75 or 80 Iraqi battalions that are currently trained and operating, so I think that that 4,000 figure understates the progress that has been made by Iraq's armed forces in the past six months.

MR. RUSSERT: Where would you put the figure? What should the American people know? How many fully capable and trained Iraqi soldiers are there?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: I'd be -- I'm not certain what number to put on the number trained. I would say that -- but as I did mention, there are 79 or 80 battalions that are out there operating. For example, just to give you an example, in Fallujah right now, there are nine Iraqi battalions that are operating. There are several Iraqi battalions up in Mosul, providing security there.

These are forces that simply did not exist six or eight months ago. You may recall last April, when the situations in Najaf and Fallujah arose, there were no Iraqi forces available to help deal with those situations. But in August, when the Najaf uprising was put down, when the Sadr City situation was brought under control, there was a real team effort between the multinational force and the Iraqi armed forces and the police forces to bring these situations under control.

So there's been a definite improvement. It's not been as good as -- or as fast as we would like, but there is no higher priority than continuing to train, equip and mentor Iraqi armed and police forces going forward. And we think that's a very essential aspect of our policies here.

MR. RUSSERT: *The New York Times* report yesterday that \$300 million was taken from the Bank of Iraq, put on a chartered jet to Lebanon. What can you tell us about that, and how did it happen?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, we're looking into these allegations, but I would note that they have arisen in the context of an electoral campaign here, and campaign charges that are being exchanged between two of the principal candidates. So I'm not entirely certain what to make of them. But I would note that they come up one week before the election date.

In any event, we're looking into it and trying to find out as much detail about those charges as possible. My understanding is that these are Iraqi monies that are involved, not United States Government appropriated funds. Nonetheless, we are trying to gather as many facts about this situation as we can.

MR. RUSSERT: The Iraqi National Security Advisor said, "corruption is worse now than under Saddam Hussein.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I just -- I simply can't accept that, or can't agree to that allegation. I would also point out that while he may still carry the official title of national security advisor, he is, in fact, a candidate for political office and not carrying out the national security advisor function at this time. But when you think of the corruption in the Saddam regime, the Oil-for-Food scandals, the billions of dollars that were smuggled out of the country, I think those levels of corruption simply pale in comparison to anything that might possibly have been happening in recent months.

MR. RUSSERT: When the world wakes up next Monday, Mr. Ambassador, what will they say and think about the Iraqi election that just took place?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, what I certainly hope they'll say is that Iraq took a very important step towards the fulfillment of its democratic process, that this was a historic first in their political history and that going forward, hopefully, that this will ensure even greater participation and inclusiveness in Iraq's political activities going forward.

MR. RUSSERT: John Negroponte, we thank you very much for your time and your views; and be safe.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Thank you very much.

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