

Interview

Office of the Spokesman

Baghdad, Iraq

January 23, 2005

Ambassador John Negroponte on ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos

(9:00 a.m. EST)

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much for joining us. How do you respond to critics who say that holding elections under current conditions is a recipe for civil war?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, these elections are called for by the interim Iraqi constitution, and by a Security Council resolution. So they are basically keeping to a political timetable that they agreed upon more than a year ago. Secondly, we foresee strong participation in the elections, especially in the northern and in the southern parts of the country. There may be some problematic areas in the center, particularly in two of the provinces in the Sunni Triangle. But even there, every effort is being made to provide the kind of security that will permit the largest possible number of residents there to be able to vote.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And how will we know if the elections are a success? What are your benchmarks?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, the very fact that the election is taking place, I think, is important. You might recall, six or eight months ago, people were simply wondering whether or not they could take place. Secondly, the fact that this will be the fair and free exercise of a popular franchise, I think, is going to be viewed important by many, many, many people here because it's a historic first. And secondly, it's going to lead to the creation of a national assembly and a democratically, popularly- elected government, whereas the current government is an appointed one. So this is part of a steady progression towards an ever more democratic society.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: That new government is going to be under tremendous pressure to get rid of American troops. It's in a lot of the platforms of the major parties. Who decides whether American troops will leave, the new government, or us?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, the -- I think leaders, political leaders here, and ourselves, have focused principally on the notion of enabling the Iraqi armed forces, their

military and their police to take on as much of the responsibility for providing security in their country as possible. That is increasing every day, and we will persist in that effort to strengthen the capacity of the Iraqi armed forces and police to take ever-greater responsibility for their security.

I think that a number of the political parties to which you refer do look to a day when they will not have to rely as much, or even at all, on American security assistance; but I think those same individuals would agree that now is not yet that moment.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But if they set a fixed date for a withdrawal, will we comply?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, none of them have done so, so you're asking me a hypothetical question. But I think the basic answer to your question is that if, at some point, the government of Iraq decides that it no longer believes that our forces are necessary here for their own security, we will comply with that wish. That's made clear, actually, in Security Council Resolution 1546.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Finally, sir, you mentioned those Iraqi security forces, and I hope you can clear something up for us this morning. At her hearings this week, Secretary-designate Condoleezza Rice said that there were 120,000 trained Iraqi security forces. But Prime Minister Allawi, the interim prime minister, was on British television this morning saying there were only 60- to 70,000 Iraqi security forces. What's the real number?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think we get into a kind of a numbers issue here about who's been trained in what way and how long. Some forces have been trained longer than others. For example, the army, the regular army here, gets a, really, a full course of training. Some of the police have been simply retrained. They might have been former policemen. My measure or benchmark, if you will, is the number of Iraqi battalions. There's something on the order of 70 to 80 Iraqi battalions that are operational at the moment. And the evidence of this is that there are a number of cities and towns that were problematic previously, such as Najaf, Sadr City, Samara, where previously, there were no Iraqi forces available to deal with those situations. Today, you will find that Iraqi forces are there and in very good control of the situation.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much.

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