

Interview

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Ambassador John Negroponte on CNN's Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer

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MR. BLITZER: Mr. Ambassador, thanks very much for joining us. As you know, one week from today the Iraqi elections. By all accounts, the Kurds will vote in big numbers up in the north, the Shiites will vote in big numbers throughout the country. The question is the Sunnis: Will they show up and vote? What's your assessment?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I certainly agree with you about the turnout in the north and in the south. I think we'll have to wait and see as far as the center of the country is concerned, particularly in a couple of the more problematic Sunni provinces. But what I can tell you, Wolf, is that no effort is being spared to provide the kind of security conditions that will enable as many people as possible in those areas to vote. This includes extraordinary security measures. It also includes some special voting procedures for people in some of these areas to take into account the particularly difficult security circumstances.

MR. BLITZER: The fact that no international observers, monitors -- significant numbers, by any means -- will be able to come into Iraq because of the security concerns, the fact that they won't be there, does that underscore how difficult this is, that the security situation simply is not at hand right now?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that even though international observers are not going to come in any significant numbers, there maybe a few, you will have, of course, the international press; but perhaps more importantly, there'll be thousands of Iraqi observers, monitors, observers, poll watchers, party members, people who've been trained by the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute and others, in the techniques of poll watching. So I don't think there's going to be any difficulty in verifying whether or not the polling shall have been conducted in an honest manner.

MR. BLITZER: Isn't it really, though, the first time in, what, two decades that no international observers of any significant numbers have been able to monitor an election in a transitional society? And you've been a diplomat for many years. It underscores the

serious problem that is Iraq today.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, that may be, but it's also the first time in several decades that this country is going to have an election. I think there's a great deal of excitement about its implications for Iraq's democracy. They're going to elect an assembly, a National Assembly, which, in turn, will select a new government, so there will be an elected government instead of an appointed one. They're going to draft a constitution and that is going to go to a referendum in October and a definitive government is going to be elected by the end of this year. So there's going to be a lot of democratic political activity in this country over the next 12 months and I think that responds to deep-seated Iraqi aspirations.

MR. BLITZER: We know that the Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi would like to stay on as prime minister. Who, in your opinion, are the biggest challengers, the biggest threats to him? Who are the other leading candidates?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I don't think we can really answer that question at this stage. First of all, we don't know which particular groups are going to win how many seats in the National Assembly. There are more than a hundred different slates that are competing, although, admittedly, there are three or four major slates. But we'll have to see the distribution of seats first.

Secondly, I'd say no one group is going to have a monolithic influence over the assembly, so I suspect when it comes to selecting a new prime minister, and that prime minister will have to be chosen unanimously by a three-person presidency of the country, there is going to be a lot of horse trading. But whatever the outcome, we are going to have to work with whatever government is chosen.

MR. BLITZER: During Condoleezza Rice's confirmation hearings in Washington on Wednesday, Democratic Senator Joe Biden, the Ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, suggested there were really only about 4,000 Iraqi troops who were well prepared, ready to go. Listen to what he said during the questioning of Condoleezza Rice:

Senator Biden: "Time and again, this Administration has tried to leave the American people with the impression that Iraq has well over 100,000 fully trained, fully competent, military police and personnel. And that is simply not true. You and I know that we're months, probably years, away from reaching our target goal."

Is Senator Biden correct?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that 4,000, that figure of 4,000, really understates the progress that has been made in the development of the Iraqi army and police forces. And if you look at their record in some of the difficult situations that they've been in during the past several months, such as in Najaf, in Sadr City, in Samarra, and

as we've watched them take on increased responsibility for security in various places, I think that they're progressing quite well.

But I would also agree that quite a bit of work remains to be done, and training and equipping and motivating the Iraqi armed forces and their police forces is really one of our highest priorities here.

MR. BLITZER: If it's not 4,000, how many well trained Iraqi forces are there right now?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that the well trained part is very subjective. We certainly trained more than 100,000. Different forces have received different levels of training. For example, the regular army gets more training than some of the other forces. And sometimes units go into combat and then after combat they have to be reconstituted and go through some re-training.

I think training and building of a military or police institution is a very complex process. None of this happens overnight. It requires patience and effort. But again, as I said, it's an extremely high priority for us. We're devoting a lot of effort to it. And I think that as Iraqi armed forces and police improve in quality and assume greater and greater responsibility for the security of their cities and for their country, this will enable our forces eventually to come home.

MR. BLITZER: So what number would you estimate is it? How many well trained Iraqi troops do you assess there is right now?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, Ms. Rice used the figure of 120,000. We count here -- General Petraeus and I, when we talk about this, we talk about the numbers of battalions that are operating and there are some 70 battalions in the Iraqi army at the moment that are out there in various parts of the country. So, again, I would say it's considerably higher than the figure that Senator Biden put forward.

MR. BLITZER: The current U.S. strategy is being criticized by some observers, including Senator John Kerry at that Condoleezza Rice confirmation hearing. He said this. Listen to what he said:

Senator Kerry: "All of my colleagues would report to you, and I think you'll hear it from generals and others, the current policy is growing the insurgency, not diminishing it."

That's by making the U.S. military very visible, out front, out in the open. Do you agree with Senator Kerry?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, since I've been here -- I don't know if I would agree with that because, since I've been here, the number of attacks instigated by the insurgency, the former regime elements and so forth, has stayed at pretty much the same level over these past six months. So, to me, that would not necessarily suggest

that the insurgency has increased.

I think certain activities that they've undertaken have definitely increased, such as their intimidation campaign against Iraqi officials and against their armed forces and their police. But overall, the level of activity by the insurgency is about the same as it was when I got here six months ago.

MR. BLITZER: Just ahead, more of the interview with John Negroponte. A threat against the Iraqi elections: Can the insurgency derail democracy? We'll continue our conversation with the U.S. point man on the ground in Baghdad.

(Commercial break.)

MR. BLITZER: Welcome back to Late Edition and we return now to my interview with the United States Ambassador to Iraq, John Negroponte.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi the Jordanian-born terrorist who's leading at least a big chunk of this insurgency. On his website, at least according to this audiotape posted on two Islamic websites, says this, "We have declared a bitter war against democracy and all those who seek to enact it. Elections are a tool used by Americans to promote this lie that is called democracy... You have to be careful of the enemy's plots that involve applying democracy in your country and confront these plots, because they only want to do so... to give the rejectionists the rule of Iraq."

That's a voice claiming to be Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. How powerful is he right now? Why can't he be captured?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, as far as his message is concerned about disrupting these elections, let me assure you that General Casey, the commanding general of the MNF, and the Iraqi ministries of defense and interior have put together a plan, a security plan, to ensure that as many Iraqis as possible can vote on January 30, election day. So they are making every effort to respond to these kind of threats.

The second point I'd make is that Zarqawi's threat is just another proof of how they simply -- they have no other plan or program for this country other than to brandish threats, intimidate people and try to prevent democracy from taking hold here.

MR. BLITZER: Why can't you find him?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Why hasn't he been -- well, certainly a number of his lieutenants and cohorts have been captured in recent months and that effort, of course, continues. But one simply has to persist in those kinds of efforts and hopefully, sooner or later, he, himself will be captured. But let me stress that it's not only Zarqawi who is involved in this resistance effort; of course, it's these former regime elements, these

ruthless Saddamists who have no other program to offer for this country except intimidation and terrorism and denying the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people.

MR. BLITZER: *The New York Times* Saturday had an intriguing article about an Iraqi-chartered plane with some \$300 million in cash being flown to Beirut, supposedly to purchase weapons from some mysterious source. Is all that true?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, we're looking into those allegations. One thing I can tell you is that no appropriated U.S. Government monies are involved here. I would also note that these allegations arise because of accusations that have been -- are being traded between two political rivals who are running for the National Assembly here. So what we may be seeing, in part, at least, here is just part of the wind-up of a political campaign.

In any case, we are looking into it.

MR. BLITZER: That money is missing, or did it actually wind up purchasing weapons for the Iraqi army?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: As I said, as I said, we're looking into it. I cannot give you the answer at the moment, but I can assure you we're looking into it. What I do know is that there are no U.S. Government monies involved.

MR. BLITZER: One of those Iraqi politicians you referred to is Ahmed Chalabi, once a favorite among many officials here in Washington, now very, very controversial, despised by some. Is he a good guy or a bad guy, from the U.S. perspective?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I don't -- I have no comment on that. What I can say is that Mr. Chalabi is on the list, the United Shia list. He is well placed on that list and therefore I think he has a very good chance of being elected to the National Assembly. So it seems to me that he will be playing a role in the political future of his country for some time to come.

MR. BLITZER: How much of the Iraqi policy -- the U.S. involvement in Iraq, the military, the economic support, the aid -- how much is it costing U.S. taxpayers every week?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I can tell you, of course, we have an \$18.4 billion reconstruction program, but I'm afraid I can't tell you the figure on a weekly basis. I really don't have that particular set of facts at my fingertips.

MR. BLITZER: Well, if it's about \$100 billion for the military involvement, that would be a billion, almost \$2 billion, a week.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: I didn't -- you'd just have to ask the Pentagon about

that, Wolf. I just don't know those figures. But let me just say that the whole purpose of our programs here are to enable Iraq to carry out these elections and develop its political institutions, and our reconstruction program is designed to help them put their economy on their feet. And, of course, we want them to develop the capacity to defend themselves without relying on coalition forces. So the whole thrust of our policies is to enable the Iraqis to take on greater and greater ownership and greater responsibility for the conduct of their own affairs so that sooner or later these costs to which you refer will be significantly reduced.

MR. BLITZER: One final question. Saddam Hussein. When do you believe his trial will begin?

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Well, I think that there may be some preliminary activity with respect to some of the other so-called high-value detainees coming up fairly soon, perhaps in the investigative trial phase of three of the other accused. I would expect that from what I'm hearing from our experts that sometime this year the investigative portion of the trial of Saddam will begin and that maybe the trial itself might take place sometime towards the end of this year.

MR. BLITZER: Mr. Ambassador, you're the U.S. point man in an extremely dangerous area. You and your colleague are very courageous, indeed. Thanks very much for joining us. Good luck next week. Good luck in Iraq.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Thank you very much, Wolf.

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2005/78