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On the Ground in Iraq: Long Term Perspective

Daniel Speckhard, U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission

Baghdad, Iraq

July 6, 2007

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QUESTION: Ambassador Speckhard, as you leave your position as Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, do you feel hopeful for the success of the U.S. effort in Iraq?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Well, after two years here, you can't help but hope that the future will bring a brighter tomorrow for the Iraqi people. And I sense that over time, they will achieve that. In the short run, it's going to be very difficult for them. There are huge challenges still remaining here. But when you think out 10 years to 15 years, you really see the potential of this country and you see where the Iraqis want to go with this. They have a long history of living together. They're very proud of their tolerance in that respect. There's lot of intermarriages amongst the sects and ethnic groups, and they really want to return to that peaceful state and they're frustrated by the current violence and political machinations.

So when I look to the long term, I really do feel that this country has huge potential and I'm expecting to come back some day to be able to have fish on the Tigris River.

QUESTION: What is it about that 10 to 15 year horizon that you think is going to make it a success, meaning what is going to change in year eight or nine? Why is longevity in this so important?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Well, what I think what we've seen in other parts of the world is that there's -- insurgencies, on average, can last from nine to 12 years as sort of a normal course of events. And it's not something you can snuff out instantly, so I think we're going to be expecting the same kind of thing here in terms of the complexity of the situation.

But what gives me the hope is that, in working with Iraqis, I know there's sometimes perhaps a mistaken feeling back

home that we're doing all the work, the Iraqis aren't taking the lead. But in reality, that's not really true when you look at the individuals out here. They are risking enormous amounts every day just to go to work, whether it's the judges or the policemen or the government officials or the school teachers or university professors or the firemen. It's really phenomenal that in the face of the risks, the violence, and the challenges, that they keep pushing ahead. And I know they're committed to this country being a peaceful, united country.

And so I think at the end of the day, the outsiders, and I don't mean just outsiders in a physical sense, but I mean even inside the country, are the extremists and they're the ones causing all the problems. And the silent majority here is going to slowly but surely have to continue to squeeze them out, and that's the challenge that they have. But I really do believe the majority here will overcome.

QUESTION: What were some of the most frightening moments you personally have had in Baghdad?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Well, you expect the challenge and the fear that you face of living in a war zone, so I think the startling thing that always happens to people here is when they're in a helicopter and it's actually the helicopter shooting off the flares, and you see the flares shoot out from the helicopter and the first time that happens to you, it does stop your heart.

And I've had personally a few other incidences here from being with a helicopter, two helicopters or one of them, unfortunately, I was in had to make an emergency landing for rocket attacks that came too close for comfort or IEDs that were too close to a convoy that I was in. But in general, after each one of those events, I just became more committed, and I have seen that amongst most of my colleagues here. That's a frustrating thing to happen and it creates a little bit of anger inside that somebody is trying to keep this country from succeeding and they're trying to intimidate us in that way.

QUESTION: And are you saying that the people working over there really are motivated in the face of that, where no matter how dangerous it is and how frightening the rest of the world sees it, where they really are motivated to work hard and have success?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Absolutely. Not everyone, obviously. Some people are frightened and go home. But the vast majority, really, of the thousands of people working out here, and then you have tens of thousands of contractors in addition, American citizens and so forth, those people are truly committed and you see people coming back for second and third tours sometimes.

And I don't see people in the face of danger saying this isn't worth it, which is kind of an interesting dynamic when you think about it because I know back home, again, people get really frustrated with the war, they just want it to end and bring everybody home. But what you find is, regardless of the political affiliations out here, the broad, broad majority of people feel that we really, really owe it to the Iraqi people to stay engaged and committed here, to help them to make it work and to help them bring some stability.

QUESTION: Do the Iraqi people want us to stay?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: That's an interesting question. What you usually find in most of the Iraqis I talk to is

they want us to stay for now, but they're against the occupation, as many of them call it, so they get caught in a little bit of a personal quandary. But a vast majority feel that if we were to leave prematurely in the current state, that the country would collapse into much, much worse violence and bloodshed. And so they want us to stay here, but they're very anxious for their government to speed up that process of being able to be responsible and for their own security forces to take control. So at the same time, you know, they feel a sense of patriotism and nationalistic pride and are looking forward to the day when they can do this on their own.

QUESTION: You served in the Balkans from 1997 to 2000. Did your work in the Balkans make you better prepared for the job you had to do in Baghdad? Perhaps I should be asking, can anything prepare one for the realities of Baghdad?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Well, it does in the sense that many of these challenges between different groups not being able to come together and the tensions that result are similar in many of those respects. And what you saw in the Balkans as well was much of the tensions were latent and held together by authoritarian regimes and when the authoritarian regime collapsed, it allowed for troublemakers to gain upper hands to ferment discriminatory and hateful messages.

And I suspect the same thing in the Balkans, which is -- it's the fueling of that by a tiny minority that can start to take hold and that, when accompanied by violence, creates that explosive cocktail. And it's really what happened here. It's the violence that set this dynamic into place, because without the violence, I think the Iraqis have that natural tendency and actual tolerance in their history here that would have carried them forward. So that was good preparation for the work here.

The other work that I've done that I felt has been very useful and useful for us to remember back in the States is setting aside the conflict, this is a country in dramatic transition. And I worked a lot in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and what you saw is countries going from authoritarian regimes to democracy and from state-run central command economies to market economies have to go through a very long and difficult process to really develop the institutions that make that work. It's not just a magical thing that happens overnight.

And as a result, on top of all the violence that's happening here, on top of the external forces from Iran and other countries that are playing in a negative way here, they're -- and also a huge challenge that we can't expect them to master overnight smoothly functioning democratic institutions and market economies. The Ambassador recently said at the Fourth of July celebration here, highlighted that really, in the United States, developing those institutions and putting the United States down a stable path took decades. And so we shouldn't be surprised that this is a long-term project in Iraq. But just like for the United States, one that's very well worth the investment.

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