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Iraq: The Road Ahead

Congressman Christopher Shays, Chairman Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations

My five trips to Iraq have allowed me to chart progress across the political, military, cultural and economic spectrums. From April to August 2003, I observed a lack of progress, but noted a good deal of success from August to December and January 2004. Since January, I have seen improvements in some areas and backsliding in others.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Transferring Power

Transfer of power must happen as soon as possible. It will be difficult, whether it happens in two months or two years. We should acknowledge the transition is never going to be easy or neat, but it has to be done.

We should not have disbanded the Iraqi government, military or police. It would have been possible to root out the “bad guys” without firing everyone. This mistake left a void, which was filled by people like Moqtada al Sadr, with whom we should have dealt sooner, when he had a force of hundreds rather than thousands.

While this has to be an Iraqi Revolution -- not an American Revolution – our troops will not withdraw when power is transferred. We will have a presence in Iraq for years to come. The future role of Coalition forces is still an open question, and will be among the toughest to resolve. Iraqis will not command coalition forces, and can only be allowed to restrict their operations in exceptional circumstances. While our troops clearly must

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consult with the new Iraqi government, they must also be able to take independent action to root out the enemy and defend themselves. This could create some conflict between the Iraqi and U.S. governments that will need to be managed.

Establishing Embassy

The decision-making process for Iraq appears fractured, and it is not strategic. There are too many spheres of influence. The Department of Defense, Department of State, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and National Security Council(NSC)/White House are too often in competition. In addition, decisions were made by the CPA without the input of other government officials who would have asked important questions or provided valuable insights.

The solution in Iraq ultimately must be political, not military. When the CPA is dissolved, the State Department will become the primary U.S. decisionmaker in Iraq, and Coalition military will take on a solely military, not political, role. This should help reduce the conflicts between the departments of Defense and State. The State Department is also better positioned to deal with the United Nations, as the transition to sovereignty occurs.

Securing Law and Order

As long as we have troops on the ground in Iraq there will be casualties. We must be prepared for continued loss of life and a long presence in Iraq. There will be significant military engagements, more terrorist bombings, and the loss of American lives throughout the world as we continue to fight the war on terrorism. To succeed, we have to fight terrorists wherever we find them.

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By not protecting assets, we sent a message to the Iraqi people that we condoned lawlessness. While we intuitively knew it was a serious mistake to not protect Iraqi assets, it was a greater mistake than we realized, both culturally and militarily.

We made a serious mistake by not gaining control of munitions depots, and weapons caches Saddam Hussein pre-deployed throughout Iraq. Almost anyone can access those weapons supplies and use them against Coalition forces.

Developing IEDs, like the drug trade, is financially lucrative. Iraqis may not hate us, but the making of bombs is how some make their living. In a three-hour briefing on Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), I learned the many ways bombs can be made and detonated. We must crack down on delivery routes for those items and increasing the staff of the IED investigation unit from the current level of 9 to closer to 100.

The Kurdish region is a model for the rest of the country. They had a 12-year head start while a no fly zone protected them. Additionally, instead of oil for food, the Kurds exchanged oil for goods. They had enough food in their region, and used the money from oil sales to invest in their education system and infrastructure.

Winning Iraqi Hearts and Minds

We did not do what was necessary to understand the Iraqi culture. We did not engage Arabic speakers and Iraqi-Americans soon enough. Consequently, we had little knowledge of how Iraqis would react to the occupation of their country.

We must redouble our efforts to help Iraqis understand the people of the United States and our intentions. The United States waited too long to undertake an effective effort to broadcast the truth to the Iraqi people.

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We must work overtime to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Al Jazeera news network is influential. While it is propaganda, and does not provide accurate information, the majority of its viewers believe it. The Coalition was too slow to counter the voice of Al Jazeera with our television stations, Al Iraqiyah and Al Hora. Al Iraqiyah has significant credibility, but Al Hora has a long way to go.

Understanding Attitudes Toward the U. S.

The Iraqis have a love/hate relationship with the United States. Polls show 2/3 of Iraqis want the Coalition to leave and 2/3 want the Coalition to stay – and they're sticking to it. They are grateful Saddam Hussein is gone and want their country stabilized, but they want us to leave as soon as possible.

Many Iraqis blame us, not Saddam Hussein, for the 12-year sanctions. In the Arab culture, people turn to their leaders when times are bad; in the United States, we turn away from our leaders.

Many Iraqis also hold us responsible for the death and destruction that occurred when they rose up against Saddam at our urging after the 1991 Gulf War. We left Saddam's Republican Guard in place and encouraged the Kurds and Shiites to rebel, but did not support their rebellion.

The Iraqis are suspicious of the United States because we are now their government, and they have never had a government they can trust. Why should they trust us?