

## WHAT SHOULD BE BELIEVED ABOUT PROGRESS IN IRAQ?

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Reading the newspaper, watching the news or listening to it on the radio, one is led to believe that little or nothing is going right in Iraq. Headlines tell of the combat deaths of soldiers; Iraqis ungrateful and impatient for costly reconstruction efforts; and the failure to find Saddam, his weapons of mass destruction, or evidence of ties to al Qaeda. It seems that the “quagmire” of “another Vietnam” is just around the corner. At the opposite extreme are some of the reports coming from the Department of Defense. In an effort to counter the bad image generated from the news reports, they too often insist that all is going according to plan, and that the trends are in the right direction.

At the same time, some middle-of-the-road reports are also surfacing from reliable sources: reports of bi-partisan congressional delegations after visits to the region, e-mail from family and friends serving there, impartial and scientifically-conducted polls. These reports tell of remaining challenges, but they also talk of schools opening, of oil starting to flow, of utilities being restored and fairly distributed, and of crowds of appreciative Iraqis smiling and waving at the American forces (more importantly, they tell of Iraqis providing soldiers information about locations and intentions of former regime loyalists and other enemy forces).

As one who recently returned from several months with the reconstruction effort in Iraq, I believe that the truth lies somewhere between the media’s tendency to focus on the bad news and an official “party line” that says all is going well and according to plan. Bad things are happening in Iraq, and the media seem to capture all of them. The sound of the explosions at the al Rashid Hotel in Baghdad draws their attention much more than the opening, just a couple of miles away, of the 14th of July bridge to commercial traffic. Conversely, U.S. military and civilian leadership in Iraq focus too much on the good things, although they are less effective than the media in getting their points into the public eye. My experience tells me that both good and bad things are happening in Iraq, but that the overall trend is positive. Objective data are needed to measure success in Iraq and to help in developing plans to achieve strategic objectives.

A stereotypical military response to this reporting dichotomy might be to blame the media for their part in a “vast, left-wing conspiracy” to deprive the administration of popular support for a war the media don’t support. Although undoubtedly some element of the media is looking for ways to discredit or embarrass the administration—particularly as the presidential election approaches—it is more likely that the effect is unintentional. Sensational news stories of “disaster” in Iraq sell much better than do stories of once-empty streets now bustling with commerce. The “boring” success stories occurring every day aren’t sensational enough to warrant broadcasting on prime-time news shows. In contrast to their broadcast counterparts, newspapers provide a broader perspective, but even there success stories are relegated to the back sections of the paper, far from the widely-read front page. The media shouldn’t be blamed for reporting that presents a bleak picture, but neither should consumers of the news believe that the picture painted represents the whole truth in Iraq.

Journalists might claim that the middle-of-the-road reports are also biased. Soldiers, after all, are not objective reporters. They don’t always have a broad perspective and sometimes exaggerate - for a variety of reasons. Although perhaps well-intentioned, the recent use of “form letters-to-the-editor” cast some doubts on the veracity of soldier correspondence from the

region. Many soldiers, though, talk of belief in their mission, even when they are aggravated at living conditions that are still poor and tour lengths that continue to be extended.

Journalists might concurrently argue that the congressional delegations are led only to the calm spots and allowed to speak only with “good” soldiers. Indeed, a recent *Stars and Stripes* poll suggests that this is exactly what is happening. Although congressional itineraries are carefully planned by their military hosts, many congressmen will not allow themselves to be held strictly to a military-developed schedule if they want to see or do something else. At least one congressman sneaked into Iraq when congressional delegations were still officially prohibited, just so he could see for himself what soldiers and Iraqis were saying about the war and reconstruction efforts. If military leaders are trying to show only the good side of Iraq, they do so at their own peril. They should know the value of showing congressmen a balance of successes and challenges. If the delegation sees only the positive side of Iraq, the congressmen may return to Washington predisposed to cut funding they see as unnecessary. Conversely, too much focus on the negative side may lead them to call for withdrawal before strategic objectives are achieved.

Early “polls” were simply collections of anecdotes and could properly be challenged by serious journalists. Results of a recent poll by the Gallup Organization and another chartered by the American Enterprise Institute, though, are much tougher to dispute. With scientific methodology, they interviewed Iraqis throughout the country, from Kurdish regions in the north to Ba’athist hotbeds in the Sunni triangle to Shiite enclaves in Baghdad and the south. Their results show that Iraqis are aware of the challenges facing them, but that they are not headed for a feared, Iranian-style government or providing massive support to bin Laden. Some media reports suggest that Iraqis long for a return to Saddam’s rule; poll results show that this idea is clearly laughable. What may be missing, though, is a view of trends over time. A message that Iraqis still overwhelmingly support the reconstruction effort is positive, but if that support has dropped from 90 percent to 85 percent in the past 3 months, the news would not be encouraging.

Casualties and other bad things are going to continue in Iraq, but they need to be put into perspective. This is, after all, a nation at war. President Bush might not have helped when he declared an end to “major combat operations” in May. People misinterpreted that as a statement that the war was completely over, not just the major fighting. Their expectations of a peaceful occupation, therefore, are the basis for cognitive dissonance when confronted with regular images of fallen soldiers. Many people simply don’t know what to believe. They still support the war effort, but are disturbed at the thought that the costs and sacrifices made for operational victory might be wasted by strategic stalemate or loss.

Achieving balance or perspective in reporting will be difficult. One way to do that might be through the use of embedded media, which worked very well during the fighting to produce positive reporting of progress in the war. The Department of Defense should encourage such embeds, but should not expect a great deal of response from the media. Media outlets are unwilling to make the investment in embedded reporters, particularly since the total number of journalists in Iraq is a mere fraction of what was present during the war. They also are concerned that embedded reporters lose their objectivity as they become too closely associated with their assigned unit. It is worthwhile for the military to make an effort to increase the number of embedded media, but the media will more likely continue to apply their adage, “Good news is no news; bad news is news.”

The military may have more luck with increasing the use of scientific polling of Iraqis. In Germany after World War II, polling was used extensively to gauge German reaction to

reconstruction efforts. That same purpose must be applied to polls in Iraq. These objective measures of success could also be used by public affairs officers trying to get positive stories into the news. The military would have to be prepared for the poll results sometimes to be antithetical to Department of Defense desires, though. If the polls are to be believed, bad news will at least occasionally surface.

Finally, the administration must continue to use its “bully pulpit” to tout the many successes that it achieves in Iraq. President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld have done so to some good purpose recently, although Rumsfeld’s recent “leaked” memo suggests that his private views of the war are at odds with his public pronouncements. The support of the American people for the war remains strong, but it would be a mistake to think that negative reporting could not erode it significantly. America’s enemies underestimated American will when they attacked. It will not easily be defeated, but American leaders must continue to make every effort to ensure domestic support of the war.

What should be believed about progress in Iraq? Both the media view and official story lines can be expected to contain substantial bias, intentional or not. Even polling can be subject to bias as pollsters—sometimes unconsciously, sometimes not—infrequently lean toward the predispositions of their sponsors. Objective and scientific polling, though, is the best route to a more valid picture of progress in Iraq. The political views of Iraqis represent a critical “target” in this conflict. It is impossible to craft a strategy for Iraq without sound information on those views and how they are changing. Without rigorous polling—broken down across regions, across ethnic and gender lines and over time—nobody can know what should be believed; it’s just one set of biased anecdotes versus another. Given the stakes, the Department of Defense needs to do better – and fast.

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