

Postcards from Iraq

There are no easy answers

CDR Randall Roberts
Officer in Charge Baghdad Area Office
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

One thing I've learned during my tour in Baghdad is that there are no easy answers. I read in the press a poll that asked Americans if we would be better off if we were to lose the war and I wonder what "war" they are referring to. I came here hoping to make a difference and I've been fortunate enough to have a job overseeing projects positively impacting the lives of Iraqi families.

I've ridden in humvees, strikers, and Bradleys with brave, honorable soldiers who patrol Baghdad neighborhoods day in and day out, many of them on 15 month orders, and many of them living at Combat Outposts, where they only get two hot meals a day. One Soldier once told me that he slept on the hood of the humvee because the berthing was too crowded — meanwhile, I've had it relatively easy. These are the sacrifices our Service Members are making.

But when an EFP kills everyone in a vehicle you can't help but ask "why?" Why are we here? It's easy to focus on the humanitarian efforts bringing water, electricity, and functioning sewers to communities ignored under Saddam's reign. I'm proud of my contributions in that regard. A politician said that Iraqis are no better off today than they were in 2003. With all the work we've done with schools, hospitals, and services, I have to disagree. I asked one of our Iraqi employees what he thought of that statement and he responded, "better off in what way?" I didn't know. I thought it was a good question.

He explained that his family's security was his number one priority. I don't blame him. He explained that pre-invasion, he didn't have to worry about his wife coming home from a party at 1 a.m. Now, they lock their doors and stay inside after 8 p.m. He says electricity and water can come later. Safety is his first concern. So I'm back to "why are we here?" That's when I realized that although the projects themselves bring about improvement, the real value is nurturing a fair government that supports her people. That's no easy task. I've seen the influence of corruption, kidnappings, and intimidation here. Will we be successful in our mission? I don't know. In Iraq there are no easy answers — we just go out each day trying to take a few more steps in the right direction. Essayons.

Personally, I will take with me the memories of meeting excited Iraqi children, seeing their smiles and hope for the future. I'll remember the handshakes from the town elders thanking me for the U.S. removing Saddam Hussein and giving them their freedom. I'll also have the proud memories of working with some of the bravest people I will ever know, both American and Iraqi — the people who risk their lives on a principle we call freedom.

