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From Nightmare to Freedom: The Rise of a Free Iraq

Secretary Colin L. Powell

Op-Ed

Knight-Ridder

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What should Americans be thinking about the progress being made in rebuilding a free Iraq? Newspaper headlines have borne much bad and frightening news lately: car bombs in Baghdad, missile fusillades launched at hotels, deadly attacks on U.S. soldiers, Iraqi police and governmental officials, and representatives of the international community.

But there is plenty of good news, too, even though it doesn't as often make the papers. And that good news stems from a single irreversible and critical truth: the Iraqi people are free.

More than any other factor, the future of Iraq will be defined by the hopes and efforts of Iraq's own citizens. The United States and other countries are helping Iraqis in many ways. We made excellent progress at expanding the scope of that help at the Madrid Donors' Conference last month, where we and 72 other nations and 20 international organizations made a strategic investment in hope by pledging over \$33 billion for Iraq's reconstruction. But in the final analysis a decent society, built on institutions that insure fairness and freedom, must come from within.

This is happening in Iraq. For the first time ever, Iraqis are experiencing a democratic civic culture at the local and, increasingly, the regional and national levels. With this experience hope is rising, and a sense of personal empowerment is spreading far and wide--even in the Sunni "triangle" that was the epicenter of support for the old regime. But so new is this freedom to Iraqis, and so distorting was the long nightmare of Saddam Hussein's misrule, that many Iraqis remain hesitant and disoriented. We must remember that the nightmare that Saddam Hussein inflicted on Iraq lasted longer than Joseph Stalin's tyranny in the Soviet Union. To expect the tragedy of Iraq's past to recede swiftly is unrealistic. Wounds take time to heal, and even when physical scars disappear, often times psychological ones remain. Iraqis need time to develop trust--trust in each other, trust in a new Iraqi leadership that they themselves will select, trust in their own future.

Real progress is being made on the ground that gives Iraqis hope that life will get steadily better. Electrical generation capacity already exceeds pre-war levels. Working with our Iraqi partners and other volunteers from the international community, we have repaired more than 1,700 critical breaks in Iraq's aging water network. We have cleared 14,500 of Iraq's 20,000 irrigation canals in need of dredging. We have renovated more than 1,500 schools. We have distributed 22 million vaccines to Iraqi children and pregnant women. Three million re-hydration kits have reached children in need.

We are also preparing the way for a new, Iraqi-led security environment. Basic police training of more than 35,000 Iraqi civilian police will commence in November, eventually graduating 1,500 carefully-vetted and newly trained and equipped civilian police each month for the next 2 years. This indigenous police force will bring new stability and a sense of confidence in the future.

Iraqi civil society is thriving. Where there used to be only one official news source, one that sensible Iraqis never trusted, Iraq now pulsates with a free press. Teachers can teach the truth, not Baathist hate propoganda. Courts are working. Banks are open and making loans. Business is thriving, as even a glance at the products available in any Iraqi city market shows. Salaries are rising, savings are coming out of hiding, people are spending and making

money.

Not only are basic services being restored to prewar levels, but in many areas Iraqis have set goals far beyond that. Iraqis aspire not to the health care system they had 30 years ago, but to a better health care system. Already more Iraqis than ever have reliable access to electrical power, clean water and basic education.

But trust once broken is hard to restore, harder even than restarting an economy. When the life of entire generations has been an unmitigated nightmare, that process of restoration is more difficult still. Iraqis must persuade themselves anew that they are good and honorable people, that they no longer need be shamed by the conditions imposed upon them by Saddam Hussein and his legion of thugs and criminals.

And, indeed, Iraqis are recovering their bravery and their honor. Increasingly, they are not afraid to speak their minds in favor of a better future. Iraqis are making great sacrifices as already too many have been killed and wounded by the misguided efforts of other Iraqis and their foreign accomplices to halt their nation's progress. There will be more sacrifices, but those sacrifices will only strengthen the determination of Iraqis of all ages and social strata to stay the course.

Above all, that is why Americans have sound reason to expect eventual success in Iraq. No matter how difficult and dangerous life can be for Americans and others trying to give birth to the new Iraq, our best ally is the Iraqi people. If they are prepared to suck in their breath and pull up their belts for the long haul, then we too must persevere, standing by their side until the job is complete.

Americans understand that nothing really worth doing is ever easy. Iraq is not easy. No serious person ever said it would be. But it is worth doing and worth doing right, so we need to summon our patience and understanding as the task of rebuilding Iraq proceeds.

We will see the proof of our success in the years to come, and we can tell already what it will look like. It will look like Iraq's nightmare turning into a fulfilled dream of freedom.

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