

Postcards from Iraq

The Ramblings of a Discombobulated Observer

by Lt. Col. Sheri Pence
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We arrived in the Cradle of Civilization in April 2006 - more than 20 soldiers of the 412th Engineer Command from Vicksburg, Miss. We are in Baghdad to fill staff and engineering positions in the Gulf Region Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I'm one of the few non-engineers, a military intelligence officer.

Iraq is a country on the edge, a country of opposites that can go either way - develop into a modern democratic country or slide into anarchy. Most Iraqis are Muslim, and some follow the Shari'a law of the Koran and interpret its teachings in a harsh way. Other Muslims recognize a more western view of law and government. Many rural Iraqis still live in tents without modern conveniences like electricity or indoor plumbing. This isn't because of any war, it's just their life. Others know a lifestyle similar to that of Americans or Europeans - indoor plumbing, electricity and fuel. The Iraqis I meet in the International Zone want a modern Iraq. They want the Coalition Forces to assist in dispersing the insurgency. They want peace and prosperity for their children to go to school, grow up in a secure environment and have a future. They don't care about Shia or Sunni. The insurgents played that card effectively, made it an issue that the average Iraqi can't ignore. It's a division that has spread, made worse by the horrific deeds of insurgents and militias.

If you want to know how it's going in Iraq, don't ask a military intelligence officer. We see the worst; that is what we have to look for. But the bright side really is bright. It's what the Iraqi people accomplish every day. Despite the violence, these folks work every day to make their life better. They are the workers rebuilding their own country. They just need a hand to make it happen, money to purchase supplies and pay salaries, assistance in building standards and infrastructure planning. We (Iraqis and Coalition Forces) have accomplished a tremendous amount here that never makes the papers. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has completed thousands of projects, from the renovation of schools to the completion of electrical substations.

It took the United States years from the time we won our independence until we stood as a developed democracy, and we had time to grow with the development of modern technology. We didn't have it thrust on us suddenly and without a complete understanding. We have to give the Iraqis time to develop the same sense of representative government responsive to the needs of the people, and of the planning necessary not only to build infrastructure, but maintain it. It won't happen overnight, and we seem to keep expecting instant peace. Time, impatience and misunderstanding are just as much the enemy as the militias and insurgents. Iraq is on the edge, and we need to encourage common ground. Iraq needs the time, investment and support of its neighbors and the rest of the world. And, yes, we are making a difference.



Lt. Col. Sheri Pence atop the Believer's Palace in the International Zone, Baghdad, Iraq. (Photo provided)

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