

## IRAQ'S ELECTIONS DECEMBER 8, 2005

On December 8, CSIS Middle East Program Director Jon B. Alterman and CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Co-Director Rick Barton briefed the press on Iraq's December 15 parliamentary elections. A transcript of that session follows:

### ELECTION PROCEDURES

BARTON: December 15th is really the culmination of an ambitious year of elections with a packed calendar, and one that's going to continue into the new year with the constitutional re-writing and the vote that must take place within a couple of months of that being done. On the 15th, 275 seats for the Council of Representatives will be decided; 230 will be elected directly among the 18 governorates and the remaining 45 by a uniquely Iraqi system that will essentially require vote totaling on another basis.

There's a hope, but not a requirement, that 25 percent of the final council will be women, and they're trying to achieve that through a candidate list where one third of the candidate list are required to be women. The council has many big jobs that will face it almost immediately. One responsibility will be the selection of the three-person presidency council, which will then be responsible for selecting a prime minister from the party with the most seats in the council.

The elections — the procedure — are being overseen by the independent electoral commission for Iraq. In recent polling, it has received a fairly high recognition — over 65 percent of the public knows who they are and 64 favorable ratings in the polling that was done by the IRI, the Republican Institute. These are comprised of non-partisan Iraqis, and so far have received good reviews from the prior elections. There's an expectation by many that this will be perhaps the biggest turnout of the various elections of this past year. And it'll be conducted in over 6,200 polling stations around the country. So, once again, a very complicated process.

There are over 300 registered political groups and about 19 separate coalitions; I'm sure Jon will talk about some of this. And there's still an issue of how many candidates — around 150 or so candidates — are being reviewed for disqualification at this time.

The monitoring of the election will be mostly done by Iraqis. There's going to be a modest international participation because of the concerns of public safety. The numbers are quite high, but there's expected to be maybe as many as 50 percent more monitors than were seen in October's constitutional referendum.

And finally, on the security issue, the plans have not been made public yet in many regards in terms of the internationals, but there's an expectation that some of the measures that have been taken in the past will be repeated. They were seen as being fairly successful — border closures, curfews, increased checkpoints and really a much greater street presence than is enjoyed on a daily basis.

### DEFINING THE STAKES

ALTERMAN: If a conservative is a liberal who's been mugged, the president is rediscovering compassionate conservatism in Iraq. The administration is turning more conservative in Iraq, and Iraqis are turning more conservative, too. There's a remarkable shift in expectations, especially in the United States. The administration is talking much less about Iraq as an inspiration for the region and instead is talking about managing Iraq and getting out. There's remarkably little discussion about this idea of Iraq being a beacon of democracy and much more trying to convince Americans that Iraq isn't a looming disaster.

There's a growing understanding that the elections of December 15th won't end uncertainty, but merely lead uncertainty into a new phase. There's going to be process of bargaining to constitute the new government, and then there'll be a four-month phase of constitutional amendments, which will be the most perilous phase yet.

The stakes are higher than ever because if you lose in this process over the next six months, you lose for the next 50 years, and everybody knows that. After the election, politics in Iraq are going to go into a period of utter darkness, as

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skilled politicians carefully assess their strengths, bluster and cut deals to improve their lot and that of their constituents.

There's certainly a chance of success, and of course, there's not a guarantee of success, but a lot of that depends on how you define success. Those in the U.S. government who wanted to define success, such as expanding the rights of women, will likely see women's rights restricted compared to women's rights under Saddam and certainly, in the south of Iraq.

Those who want to define success in Iraq as Iraq being a prosperous country are likely to be disappointed, as will those who saw the new Iraq as being a socially liberal society. Those who imagined a strong and unified government will be confounded by the strength of the provinces and the relative weakness of the central government.

### **IRAQI POLITICS**

ALTERMAN: I think Ambassador Khalilzad has done a fairly good job of paving the way for Sunni participation and moving the vote along. If you think back to the previous votes in Iraq, there has always been talk about moving the dates. And there hasn't been talk of moving these dates. I think that's one mark of the sense that there are genuine Iraqi politics which are taking over, and there's a process that people begin to have confidence in.

Electing parliamentarians on a provincial basis is also a significant step forward, because finally parliamentarians will have constituents. It's a remarkably important change over the way Iraq has been run since the fall of Saddam. People actually have constituents, and people actually have representatives and say that they should represent my interests. And that's a real step forward.

But it seems to me, if you look at what the likely outcome of the elections will be, it's a return to primordial identifications — ethnic and religious identifications — and toward groups that will both protect people and deliver wealth to them.

I think one of the most surprising things to the White House must be that after almost three years after the fall of a 30-year Ba'athist dictatorship in Iraq, elections in Iraq remain almost entirely content free and are all about resources. Three decades of oppressive ideology did not lead to a thirst for liberalism, but instead helped shape a pervasive fear that leads people to seek protection from decidedly undemocratic forces. In addition, almost three years of increasing Iraqi self rule has not lead to the emergence of a competent class of local administrators.

Politics are horribly corrupt, and national politicians are remarkably weak delivering services. Of course, this opens up room for religious groups and religious

organizations who are often extraordinarily competent at delivering services, and this helps explain some of their strengths. I think the other issue is this issue of the rise of religious forces. Clerics, I think it's important to remember, are not politicians in the traditional sense, because they actually have unbending principles. They actually think there's a truth out there. The other part of this is that clerics are very often good at being respectful of somebody else — or commanding respect — but they're often not as good working in peer groups. And when you're talking about trying to make national Iraqi politics work, a group of people who are all looking to be shown respect or to show respect for somebody else, coming together sometimes makes for a chaotic political environment.

One of the enduring problems in Iraq is the problem of Iraqi expectations. As Americans swooped in, destroyed the Iraqi army in less than three weeks, and many Iraqis had the sense that Iraq would soon look like Dubai. Yet, long accustomed to being passive under Saddam, Iraqis showed themselves to be equally passive after Saddam's

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fall. The key victory of the insurgency has been to puncture the notion of American capacity. For many Iraqis, the U.S. invasion has not led to an improvement in their daily lives. Foreign ideologies are more suspect than they've ever been in Iraq. I think it's very important to remember Iraqis aren't looking for the best possible system. Iraqis are looking for a system that is acceptable, one they can

live with. And that system is unlikely to be liberal as we understand that term.

### **ELECTION OUTCOMES**

ALTERMAN: It would be nice to have a sense for what the outcome of the elections will be, but we simply don't. The country is too unsafe to conduct traditional polls. I think the official Shi'a listing's very well positioned. And the Kurds will likely see a modest decrease in seats, as proportional representation limits their gains from ethnic unity.

Sunnis will have a role, and there will be strong encouragement, not least from the United States, to bring some Sunni parties or some Sunni forces into the ruling coalition. There are few indications that the secular forces, largely led by Alawi, will do well, but if they do they could play an important role as sort of a kingmaker.

The most likely outcome, though, is one that includes a strong Shi'a-Kurdish core that devolves power to the periphery. It's important to remember the traditional Shi'a

— the Shi'a interests, the Shi'a parties, the traditional Shi'a leadership — is strong and conservative. The Kurdish leadership is strong and relatively liberal, at least in the U.S. social terms.

And the way you solve that conundrum is federalism. So you devolve power. You say the Kurds can do whatever they want where the Kurds live; the Shi'a can do whatever they want where the Shi'a live. And the problem is that everybody leaves the center of the country alone. It doesn't have resources, necessarily. And you have more conflict, because Baghdad is a mixed community. You have people fighting from different communities.

What you could see is a relatively prosperous north and south, and continued conflict for a very long time in the much more mixed center, which is also the place where the Sunni communities live and where the Sunnis feel that their country is being stolen away from under them.

How many Sunni parties will sign up to what some will see as the dismemberment of their country, a strong federal system, is unclear. And there will certainly be a lot of posturing on each side before any real deals are made.

I think we're going to have the electoral returns next week, but it's probably going to be six months until we understand what the results of the elections will be.

### **ELECTORAL LEGITIMACY**

BARTON: Just to add a couple of concerns to what Jon just said. Obviously the first concern is about the management of the elections themselves. And clearly the public safety issue is the first and largest and most unpredictable element of the whole event.

We know that there will be intimidation. We know that there will be charges of vote fraud. We know that some of them are likely to be valid. But the question of open participation is really driven mostly by the threat and the fear of violence.

I don't think there's anyway to predict that, but I think that is still the greatest concern about election day and the period around the election.

The second concern that I have is that the half-life of these elections — the value of these elections — seem to get shorter from one election to the next. And it's mostly because there's been a question about the authenticity of the result, not the election results themselves, but the results that these new elected officials are producing.

The way this election will be measured in terms of whether it's a success or not will be shown by the ability of these newly elected officials to handle an extremely ambitious agenda in a very short period of time, which has

been, obviously, the great danger of this accelerating calendar that they've been facing for the last year and a half, through the whole democratization process.

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And the issues that they will be facing, not just the organizing of themselves, which is difficult under any circumstances, but particularly so for a group of people who have never really had to do this way before.

We still have a group of relatively inexperienced politicians, and they are going to have to move right away to, then, elect their leaders to get themselves organized. But they're going to have to get on to really gain

their legitimacy and to really be seen by the Iraqi public as something more than an extension of the occupation forces.

### **THE POST-ELECTION POLITICAL AGENDA**

BARTON: They're going to have to clearly address three big issues that Iraqi politicians have not taken ownership of yet. The first is obviously the foreign occupation and what to do with the foreigners in their country. If they don't take that issue up pretty quickly, I think that their credibility within the country is likely to be suspect.

The second is, they are going to have to come up with a security model that their countrymen and women have confidence in.

And the third is, they are going to have to come up with a wealth-sharing model that actually engages the Iraqi people, rather than looks like a Baghdad solution by Green Zone politicians.

That would make a busy and ambitious agenda if it was here in Washington, let alone in a place where you are getting 275 people together really for the first time ever and asking them to get all these things done really in the next few months. There has to be progress right away for this election to have a half-life of more than a few days.

### **QUESTION AND ANSWER THE ROLE OF MUQTADA AL-SADR**

ALTERMAN: My understanding is that Muqtada's people were brought on to this unified Shi'a list some time ago.

Muqtada al- Sadr's forces are sort of the X factor in Iraqi politics because everybody thinks they're very strong, but they don't have a large standing force. They're perceived to have moral authority. They're perceived to have a good organization. And in some ways that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I think Muqtada has also proven himself to be one of the great politicians in post-war Iraq. If you haven't read Anthony Shadid's *Night Draws Near* yet, he has a fascinating account of sort of the growth of Muqtada, which has only continued. The people I know who have been back and forth to Iraq continue to be impressed by the consensus that Muqtada is really the fastest rising force in that country. Bringing him on is dangerous, because you assume that he is going to stay at 30 percent of the coalition, and containing his ambitions could be a headache after the elections. But certainly before the elections, I think it's one of the things that the Shi'a list sees as part of their strength.

#### **POST-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT AND TROOP LEVELS**

ALTERMAN: On the U.S. policy side, there are a bunch of people in the U.S. government who said, I'm going to stick it through the Iraqi elections and throw in the towel on this job.

I think you're going to see a change in personnel on the USG side, partly with diplomats coming home, partly with others moving around. Iraq is more than a full-time job. There are a lot of people who said, I will stick it through until these elections.

What happens right after the elections is the Iraqis go into huddle.

My guess is, in general, the whole discussion of troop levels is driven by congressional politics and the election next November, and that's going to shape it as much if not more than what's actually happening on the ground in Iraq.

BARTON: I have a slightly different view. I think this whole discussion of troop levels has been almost — has been almost completely initiated from this end — from the United States. And finally the meeting of the political parties — of the Iraqi political parties — took it up as something that they should be getting in front of as well, an issue that 80 percent of their people have a very distinct feeling about, at least from the polling, however reliable or unreliable it is, suggests.

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So to me the whole discussion of what's needed on the ground and how it should take place has to be driven by the Iraqi politicians. If they don't drive it, they'd lose all their credibility. They'd continue to be essentially puppetlike figures in this process. And this is one of the three central issues that is most on the minds of Iraqis.

So I think that they need to push this agenda. It would have been good if it'd been pushed a month ago or two months ago or three months ago by the supposed Iraqi leadership. Until that happens you really aren't going to have an understanding of it in Iraq or here in this country. And that will change the debate in this country dramatically.

If they call for immediate negotiations for a phased withdrawal, that would change the tenor of the whole debate and give them some credibility. And then it gives them the standing also to take on the other foreigners who are there — the terrorists who are in the country as well.

#### **IRAQI DEMANDS FOR TROOP WITHDRAWAL**

BARTON: We've been trying to control the game of the U.S. force structure in Iraq. These are chaotic circumstances. Control is the last thing you could get out of them.

You're lucky if you can play the role of the shepherd. And we've been trying to build a very tight corral and it just hasn't worked, obviously. This is the ultimate issue of trust. On the other hand, it would probably be the best way for us to resolve this issue, which our political process isn't going to resolve in the coming months.

It would be a huge favor to us if they were to call for phased-U.S. withdrawal, but every time an Iraqi politician suggests that he's going to do it, there does seem to be an invisible hand that delays or pulls him off stage.

#### **U.S.-IRAQ RELATIONS**

ALTERMAN: I don't sense a lot of gratitude to the United States in Iraq, and therefore politicians aren't going to get ahead by talking about their good friends, the Americans. The sense that the Iraqis have is that the Americans failed to deliver, and that American failure to deliver is not because of incompetence but because of ill will.

That perception is not easily changed. As we go more toward populist Iraqi politics, which is partly in the American interest, those politics will lead Iraq's leaders not to seem like an extension of the U.S. government.

The problem is they have a security capacity problem absent U.S. forces, and they're going to have to find their way doing that. My guess is that part of the way you do it is by having a somewhat ambiguous policy, but some people who say one thing and some who say another.

BARTON: There are some people in the U.S. government who hope that we can shape the nature of this next government. There are still some people who are in the overly meddlesome side of the equation. And they're just not going to give up their habit of trying to shape events at every step of the process. Whether they'll get their way or not, I think that's a bit unpredictable right now. But this is such a late-breaking event — that the tight calendar, the late list of candidates, the breaking coalitions, the — there's just so many elements that

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— for people who love short elections, we're really getting a good taste of them.

#### **SECURITY IN IRAQ**

ALTERMAN: I don't know if Rick agrees; my sense is that you'll have stronger military and law enforcement in the north and south and a much more difficult situation in the center. The core issue, as I said, is going to be resource allocation. And people are going to have to make the trade-offs: how much security do you think you can get by giving how much to violent groups or groups that are sympathetic to violent groups? The police in the south, as you know, have made a strong effort to incorporate the militias, as have the peshmerga, partly because you want guys with weapons training to feel some loyalty. The outcome is not going to be one outcome. We're going to continue to see a huge diversity in the security situation in the country.

BARTON: I almost completely agree with what Jon said. I think that the safest places in the country right now are somewhat privatized still. And so there is a de facto — that is the reality on the ground, and that's not going to change overnight. I think what could change and what the elections could produce is if people in the country, including these newly recruited soldiers and police, feel that it is worth — that the new government is worth fighting for, that it is in fact an authentic Iraqi voice, then the effectiveness of those people becomes much, much greater than it is right now.

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Right now, they're not only amateurs; the real professionals are the privatized militias and the leftover Republican Guards. Those are the most skilled Iraqi fighters in the country right now. So we've got amateurs working against professionals. But the amateurs have a chance if they have some spirit. Up until now, it'd be hard to say that they're inspired by the Green Zone leadership that they'd been offered. The likelihood that they're going to be victimized is even greater. That's the great opportunity here, especially if this new government takes on the issue of the foreigners and what to do.

We've advanced an artificial calendar and we wanted people to believe in things that really are truly important, such as constitutions and elections, but we've done it at a time when the public had other things that were more on their minds. And so consequently in a way we've diminished the value of these exercises because we haven't been addressing what's most on people's minds: public safety, well-sharing, what the heck are these foreigners doing and what are their long-term plans. None of those things are that hard to address, but we just haven't been comfortable with what the answers might be.

#### **ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS UNITY**

BARTON: When we did one of our measure of progress studies of the whole country — we did interviews all over the country — we were surprised in the Kurdish area at how much dissatisfaction there was with their existing government.

I think there's pluralism within all these groups, and that's one of the things that we constantly miss. So I would be disinclined to believe that if 88% of Iraqis want the U.S. to leave, it was 100 percent of the Kurds are in favor of the U.S. and 100 percent of the other people want the occupation removed.

ALTERMAN: You know, let's break down a fallacy, which is the idea that Sunnis are united. They're not. The Shi'a aren't united; they're more united than the Sunnis are. The Sunnis aren't united at all. They are going to be some Sunni groups inside the governing coalition, I'm sure. There's a lot of pressure from some of the neighboring states on the Sunnis to play ball a little bit, and we've heard about Iraqi Islamic Party and others getting some inducements to support the referendum.

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So you're going to have some Sunnis in. The question is, does that become a dynamic where Sunnis feel vested in the system or not? And a lot of that depends on how much the Sunnis try to get and how much the Shi'a and Kurds think they deserve, and that ultimately is a political negotiation. And that's one of the reasons why the formation of the government is going to take so long and the constitutional amendment process is going to take so long because the chips are going to really be down, and this is really going to determine what the future is going to look like. There's going to be a whole bunch of bluster and people trying to use every possible tool they have. I mean, this is real — not American politics; this is real politics, and it really, really matters.

### **IMPACT OF THE SADDAM TRIAL**

ALTERMAN: I didn't perceive a huge Iraqi interest in the trial. I mean, it's not like the O.J. trial as far as I can tell. That's about the past, not about the future. And I think a lot of Iraqis know what they want to know about the past, and their concern is, is their future going to be any better? My sense is Iraqis are not getting distracted or drawn into it. I haven't been to Iraq and have no near-term plans of going, so I could just be misreading the situation.

BARTON: I would say that the trial is important and that it will capture the public imagination. And the key — the timing to me isn't as important as whether the process is perceived as being fair. It's so public that almost everybody's going to have a chance to shape an opinion, the fact that it's televised, the fact that they're seeing this guy, but my guess is it may be like Milosevic, that over time there will be — his initial outburst, his initial proclamations or whatnot, his insults, will have some tabloid quality to them. But his half-life is probably going to diminish considerably as he turns in his — tyrant with tirades is not a — it's not great. But I think it's important that it be seen as fair and the timing had to be seen as fair.

I think they've taken quite a long time preparing the trial for at least for the domestic Iraqi consumption. I mean, most people want to see justice carried out much faster than that. So the fact that they've taken the time to prepare it, I think it's — I think the whole process looks as if it has a balance to it, and that's really — that's about all you can do with these cases.

### **THINKING OF SADDAM AS AN IRAQI**

BARTON: I'm sure he has people who think he's terrific. I remember in the last days of the Nixon administration, the polls here in the United States said that 29 percent of Americans still believed in Nixon. And the best letter I've ever seen in The New York Times said it just proves you can fool 29 percent of the people 100 percent of the time. So whatever body politic there is, there's always going to be a nucleus of folks that hang with you. I think, as Barney

Frank said, your base is the people who are with you when you're wrong. And so I think that potential is always there.

ALTERMAN: Saddam remains the symbol of the guy who said 'no.' In a world where people are consumed with a sense of humiliation and unfairness, standing up and saying no to that resonates with at least some people.

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### **THE U.S. ROLE IN IRAQ AFTER A WITHDRAWAL**

BARTON: My suspicion is that we will end up with a negotiated phased withdraw that will start in 2006 and probably go for a couple years, and that we will have a residual capacity of over the horizon response, wherever that's placed — a training capacity and some imbedded capacity. I think that those elements will probably stay to address the kinds of issues that Jon has said are beyond going concerns, that we won't have real comfort about and probably the Iraqi government will not have real comfort about.

And in a way, we will also have Iraq underneath our protective shield — our larger protective shield — in the way that Kuwait is. If somebody were to attack Kuwait right now, they are under an invisible shield, basically. And Iraq would be — would have that same advantage.

### **IS IRAQ WORTH 1000 U.S. LIVES PER YEAR?**

BARTON: Our force structure in Iraq would have to be a much more agile model. It has to be more of a surprise model. The difference I saw from being on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Iraq you felt as if the nasty surprises might come your way. In Afghanistan, it feels as if we maybe are ones who are able to provide the nasty surprises. That creates a very dramatic difference on the ground. I suspect we will end up moving in that direction.

The reasons for our ongoing engagement there go back to the issues that Jon raised, which basically — it's a big place. It's in an important neighborhood. There is the opportunity for these people to be well funded. So there is an ongoing terrorist dimension to it. And there's obviously an oil dimension to it. Plus we have an interest in the region in advancing a different form of governance, because we think that the regional form of governance is inherently unstable, even though it may be stable for a day or the next five years.

ALTERMAN: But I think the other part is the premise is it would take 1,000 lives a year. And I think what Rick said — and I totally agree — that you're not going to look at 1,000 lives a year indefinitely. We're going to look at, basically, a

negotiated redeployment, a lot of imbedded cooperation and a lot of over the horizon capacity both in military intelligence and whole bunch of other things. And that's just not a 1,000 person a year responsibility.

## **IRAQ AND TERRORISTS**

ALTERMAN: There are an awful lot of people who share our interest in not having Iraq turn into a jihadi base, including all the countries around Iraq. You're going to have a general movement toward cooperating to not have that be the environment. And you're going to not have 160,000 American troops trying to provide it.

BARTON: Let me throw one more thing into this. Our colleague, Dan Benjamin, had a good piece that many of you probably saw. I think it was in the L.A. Times a week or two ago. And he's not worried about the insurgents taking over the whole country, which I think is part of the hyping of the present circumstance. But I think the way Jon's described it, which is that there will be opportunities to operate out of the country I think is a much more real concern.

## **LONG TERM EFFECTS OF THE ELECTION**

ALTERMAN: This is almost an entirely content-free election. As a consequence, what it will tell us about is the organizational capacity of the different ethnic or religious groups in Iraq. It won't tell us what their bargaining skill is, which is ultimately going to be the determinate of how well they do.

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And the policy is going to be a consequence of how well they bargain. So I think we're sort of several steps away. Once the election returns come in, we're several steps away from knowing what the results will be.

BARTON: Can I add something to that? I think that we've had such a presence in the place, that of the 275 people, we should know most of them. So then it really will come down to whether they will be able to come up with a cohesive leadership, which we have not seen yet, and whether they'll be able to come up with an agenda that actually addresses people's concerns.

Those, I think, are much tougher. We'll know their personalities, but we can't really predict their behaviors. I keep thinking of these people as green zone politicians. But we should be thinking of them as greenhouse politicians. They have been growing up under the shelter of a protective and essentially a rather dominant sponsor. And now you're getting to point where they're going to actually

have to be out there on their own, a little more I hope. And if they do that, then you're going to have to see whether you get this kind of maturing. That's really the big challenge.

If you take Jon's argument that it's been sort of a content free process, I think part of that the rush of the calendar just to execute the elections. I happen to think that the average Iraqi has been extremely concerned with their personal safety for some time.

Those issues have been by far the most important in the minds of the Iraqis. But we've been giving them sort of a diet of elections and constitution writing and other things, which normally would be the most important thing in people's minds, but they've been of secondary interest.

Most people who are experts on insurgency — and I am not — suggest that you have to have the political dimension in the right place. And right now the political dimension is not in the right spot. The political dimension is, if you have a problem in the country with your constitution, with your public safety, with your oil production, it's pretty much the Americans responsibility or fault. That doesn't put the responsibility where it needs to be. And until you get that right, you don't really make progress on anything else, in my view.

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*"[Iraqis] see the elections as a way to demonstrate their loyalty to the people who will take care of them."*

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ALTERMAN: If I could just walk back. Are people concerned about the American presence? Yes. Do they see the elections as a way to advance their interests there? No. They see the elections as a way to demonstrate their loyalty to the people who will take care of them.

They'll continue to have all sorts of discussions. They'll continue to try to lobby and everything else. But the elections are a time to wave the flag and lock in the support of the people who you hope are going to protect you and not much more than that.

## **ELECTIONS AND SECTARIAN IDENTITIES**

ALTERMAN: Not to belabor this point, but I'm going to belabor it a little more. The reason that elections work — the reason why elections are uncertain in this country is because people have multiple identities? You may be upper class, white, male, professional living in a certain region, certain religious values. You can be all sorts of things — liberal, conservative, and so on. You trade-off between these different identities. And the reason why you

sometimes vote for a Republican candidates and sometimes vote for Democratic candidates, for some people, is because they're trading off between their identities. The ideas of soccer moms and NASCAR dads are constructions of people who have multiple identities.

In Iraqi politics, people don't have multiple identities. People say, I am voting with my folks. And my folks are relatively fixed, singular identification. And as long as that's the case, we don't have people trading off and imagining themselves in different kinds of ways and belonging to several groups. People belong to one group, and the way they advance their interest is by advancing the interest of their group.

BARTON: Where I would agree with Jon on this is that by and large, politicians do work off of their base first. Jon is describing a series of fairly narrow bases that politicians are anchored with.

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The only thing that will make this election really significant is if you can get some unity of purpose. There are issues that, in fact, probably unite most Iraqis and that you could develop to unite Iraqis. A national wealth sharing plan that has a national share, a governorate share and then a share for individual Iraqis, would probably be an idea that would capture the imagination of almost all Iraqis. And that's a way to get around sort of this — everybody has their own and

they feed their own first — model.

There are opportunities here, but they've really got to take them on. This issue of the national occupation and the presence of foreigners, first and foremost, probably the United States, but not too far behind them, foreign terrorists. That's an issue of national unity. If somebody takes it on, you have a chance to have a lot of politicians on the same side, because they do have a common interest.

But I'm not disagreeing with Jon's analysis. I think there's a likely course of events — and then there is a narrow opening for a more successful course of events. My argument is that it would be nice to have somebody articulate that. And it would be nice to have the United States, for example, trying to promote that rather than getting stuck in this sort of single identity politics that Jon's describing.

## **FOREIGN TROOP PRESENCE**

BARTON: The presence of foreign troops has huge meaning to the Iraqis. And that's why it's so vital that their government leaders take this issue on themselves rather than being delivered the results of our deliberation here. I just don't — I personally think it would be one of the most dramatic messages to be heard in Jon's part of the world, really, is if the Iraqi government called for the start of negotiations to set a phased withdrawal. I just think that would be seen as a radical departure. It would mean that that the Iraqis are actually in the lead in their own country. That's been our rhetoric, but it hasn't been our reality. And so nothing like aligning reality with rhetoric to get greater mileage for your ideas. So I just believe that's got to be the case.

## **SECURITY IN IRAQ**

BARTON: You have to realize that the safest places in the country right now are not being run by the Iraqi army or the by the United States military. The safest parts of the country are being run by local militias.

So there's been all this discussion about the ink spot theory. Well, if you did an ink spot of Iraq right now, most of the existing ink spots would have sort variations of peshmerga and other militias. So that's the reality. I doubt that all of these systems — I've tried to sort of think of this — what's the existing security system in the country? You have 150,000 U.S.; you have 10,000 other internationals; you have 20,000 or so private security that pretty much are on our side, mostly former western soldiers; and then you have somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 capable — depending on who you're listening to — capable Iraqis. And then on top of that, you probably have, you know, 100,000 that are not — militias that are not showing up in any official census.

So the number on the ground is already rather different than the one that most of us are discussing, because most of us talk about this thing in terms of 150,000 Americans, maybe 10,000 other coalition members. And then we sort of talk about the capable Iraqis, but there are a lot of other capable Iraqis who are already on our side. So the equation is really quite a bit richer, but that opportunity to disrupt — I think the only way you'd really break the insurgency is if you get those people who are genuine nationalists to oppose the presence of the foreign insurgents. And that's your only chance to really break — that's the political dimension and that's why I keep coming back to this.

And the one argument the Sunnis have made from the beginning — I don't think it's necessarily sincere, but it's been made — is we won't really fully participate until the issue of foreign occupation is addressed. So I always like



to call people on the question that they put on the table. And then let's — okay, now we know where you are.

And again, a phased withdrawal offers you an awful lot of opportunities. The way we're deployed could change. I mean, again, when you drive around Iraq, we have this feeling of garrisons. We go out on patrols at 60 miles an hour. It's just — you don't have the feeling that we're in the communities very well.

### **SADDAM'S LEGACY**

ALTERMAN: I don't see a party that would represent the sort of back-to-the-good-old-days-under-Saddam. What I see is an array of parties and groupings of people who say, I can protect you, and I can drive resources to you.

BARTON: I don't see an idealization of Saddam in many places. There are — people probably liked the order, but they didn't like — they didn't like the way the order was achieved. So I don't see that there is a kind of a nostalgic dimension to this election, but maybe we just haven't picked that up yet.

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*"I don't see an  
idealization of  
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many places."*

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ALTERMAN: Except to the extent that people say we're not going to go like lambs to the slaughter, right? I mean, and you see that in the Sunni areas — the sense that what Saddam represents is resistance to being completely screwed, and, we'll support that. And I think you're seeing that among different Sunni groupings.

### **PROVINIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS**

BARTON: I visited some of the PRTs in Afghanistan. I hadn't really heard what the design is going to be for these PRTs in terms of how different they'll be from Afghanistan.

But they'll still have — there'll still be the same balance of 50 soldiers plus one to five civilians. The advantage they have is that they do hasten the liquidity into places that should be too dangerous for civilians to work, which is a lot of the problem areas.

I'm not sure yet whether they'll have much of an impact, because we've already put quite a lot of money into commander funds in some of these troubled areas, so I'm not sure how different this will be, other than they may be — the presence of the civilians in that mix might be richer, which I think would be advantageous because the military — you really have to have multiple skills, and we don't have — most of the people we have on the ground are not Clark

Kent or even his — even his other identity. You basically have to do a very sophisticated political analysis. You have to be able to build community relations. You have to find local ownership, but then you have to bring money to it, and those are not all pieces that our military, historically, has been trained to do.

The idea of the PRTs that you're going to get that enrichment from bringing other branches of civilians into the process, I think that's necessary. But I have the feeling a lot of these ideas in Iraq are basically a day late and a dollar long because we missed the moment, we are now expending twice as much money to do it, and I'm not convinced that it's going to take hold. Not that they're bad ideas, but a good idea in the wrong time ends up not being as good an idea.

### **REACTION TO BUSH'S SPEECH**

BARTON: I'm a little bit uncomfortable with being able to second-guess the president too much, because I'm afraid that I don't — and he doesn't — have very good information. There's one overriding problem here, and that is that it's too dangerous for most of our friends to go anywhere. So consequently, reporting on how well things are going or questioning whether they're going well is kind of flying blind. That's really what worried me. The

president's language yesterday was more modest, more realistic than any prior speech. It really had the right tenor, for my thinking, of the way we should have talked about this thing two and a half years ago. So this gets to the timing issue. Again, the speech was a great speech, but maybe not so good yesterday.

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*"The speech was  
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good yesterday."*

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Most of the people I know who are working in Iraq are working in much smaller areas than they were before and under much more limited conditions, so it's really hard to imagine. And we haven't changed the model enough. Again, if you believe, as I do, that there's always a chance to do something better, then I think we could do things in Iraq. But I didn't hear the president really talk about any of those much more entrepreneurial approaches, which would require putting direct assets in the hands of more Iraqis, working much more at the governorate level. He did talk about working smaller rather than larger projects; that's part of it.

You have to start buying back the confidence of the individual Iraqi citizen because we've lost our opportunities to really create many of these sort of governing coalitions that you have to have in these early stages if you want to get efficiencies.

I talked to one reporter last night who had been at the hospital in Najaf and said, basically, that only the first floor had been remodeled. The rest of it had been looted. This was one of Bush's examples. Obviously the president doesn't really know how that hospital in Najaf is operating.

I'm still really worried. Also, an economic discussion that doesn't talk about the oil and the wealth-sharing of the country is unrealistic — oil is the economy. You can talk about everything else that you want to, but essentially, oil is the economy.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF BAGHDAD**

BARTON: If good things were happening in either of those places, it would be great. I'd be very happy to have good news in Najaf. Those are not easy spots, and they're among the larger cities. But at the end of the day, if we can't actually make Baghdad safe, I think it's pretty hard to make an argument for the country. Baghdad has approximately one-third of the population; it's the crossroads of everything. Baghdad has a rich mix of all the Iraqi cultures. The greatest U.S. presence has been in Baghdad, and it's been there a long time, but Baghdad is still not really functioning.

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*"If we can't actually make Baghdad safe... it's pretty hard to make an argument for the country."*

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We appointed mayors of Baghdad. We've been through a lot of different phases, and Baghdad is still the name of the game. I think the president should be asking his team how to make Baghdad safe. That could be our responsibility, and that would be quite a gift to deliver to the Iraqi people.

### **THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT**

BARTON: The thought that we can create a competent central government in a few months that's going to be delivering services to all of the country, particularly under these circumstances, is a myth. If you were to walk into the vice president's office today and say, "I've got an idea for Katrina and all those victims. I'm going to build a functioning bureaucracy of 50,000 to 100,000 people in Washington, D.C., and within three months New Orleans will be fine," you'd be on 17th Street in about 30 seconds. And yet that's what we're saying.

Again, we have to do these things in realistic ways, instead of following a totally impractical vision in someone's head.

I saw that in Kosovo. In August, the Europeans thought that we'd have 500 bureaucrats functioning in

Pristina by October. They couldn't do that in Brussels by October, so how could they possibly deliver it in Kosovo?

### **THE IRAQI OIL INDUSTRY**

ALTERMAN: The transition has been tough on the oil industry. Oil is not coming out at nearly the levels people had hoped or planned for, and it's not going to come out at those levels for some time. It's a very uncertain environment. The major oil companies are very concerned about investing right now. Oil is where the Iraqi national wealth comes from. And as long as the insurgency is clipping along as it is, this is going to be a problem.

The Iraqi dilemma is that politics are basically about distributing oil wealth, but there won't be oil wealth until the politics work. You have a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem, which, quite frankly, the Iraqis will be muddling through for some time to come.

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*"Politics are basically about distributing oil wealth, but there won't be oil wealth until the politics work."*

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There won't be huge amounts of Iraqi oil hitting the market. There won't be huge investment in the Iraqi infrastructure. And yet, the oil money is what everybody is counting on as the magic pill to make things work, and that's a central problem.

BARTON: We've known from the beginning that it was going to take \$10 billion to get to this level of production, or \$20 billion to get to that level of production. But the money's not being invested. The politics are not right, as Jon described. Most of the time, we've been well below the production levels during Saddam's reign.

Paul Wolfowitz had a prediction that by 2010 we'd be up to 6 million barrels a day. Vice President Cheney had a prediction by the end of 2004 we'd be at 3 to 3.5 million barrels a day. We're working to get to 2 million. So nobody's done this very well. Oil resources will not ever be protected unless the Iraqi people feel that every attack on oil is an attack on them. If you don't get the ownership right, you can't expect people to grow up. We have kept saying that, but our actions have not been consistent with that.

### **ECONOMIC SUBSIDIES**

BARTON: It costs between \$10 billion and \$15 billion a year for the central government to buy food baskets, but they were never that popular. If the food basket costs the government \$800 per person, and you offered Iraqis an annual \$600 per person for food, my suspicion is that they would probably take that deal. Then again, people are

reluctant to move out of those things. You'd also have to move to a different trust system, and we've been reluctant to do that.

We've got to change radically the way we're doing business, and we've got to move out of our heavy handed, central government-controlling model if we're going to make progress. And that will give us a better chance against the insurgency.

ALTERMAN: In Egypt they raised bread prices and they had riots. Yet there was a problem: they had to do something about the bread subsidy, because it was costing the government too much money. So they introduced a better quality of bread which was more expensive, and then they started lowering the quality of the subsidized bread. Then they started putting foreign objects like stones and machine parts in the subsidized bread, and, after a while, nobody bought the subsidized bread anymore. That's how Egypt made the transition toward decreasing the subsidy. But the fact that the Egyptian government had to go through these antics shows the political difficulty of raising prices.

And in Iraq, there is both the huge food subsidy, which people desperately need, and a gas subsidy, which people feel they desperately need.