

Iraq: The Blame Game

Four interrelated things happened at nearly the same time when I was preparing to write this column, all of which reminded me pointedly that the Foreign Service is getting a flagrantly unfair and uninformed raw deal in the media these days, and that we are increasingly being turned into the whipping boy for problems in Iraq.

First, we all witnessed the gratuitous State-bashing in the now-famous “nightmare with no end in sight” speech by retired Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez, who suggested that the military was doing its part, but that the State Department bore the blame for failing to send its people to fix everything wrong in Iraq. Second, I recently testified before a dozen members of the House Armed Services Committee who mainly wanted to know just why the Foreign Service has been “utterly absent” in Iraq since 2003.

Third, we learned that the department is in the process of doubling the number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq — the dangerous Red-Zone outposts where nearly 100 of our members are serving — despite the recent report issued by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction concluding that security conditions have crippled the efforts of PRTs, which “have shown little progress in promoting economic development, the rule of law or political reconciliation.” Last came the wildly erroneous misinterpretations by the media of the director general’s announcement of the Iraq “prime candidate” identification exercise, which was portrayed as proof that State diplomats have been refusing to serve in Iraq and will now have to be forced to go.

How did we get tagged as slackers who have allowed Iraq to deteriorate to its current state? How have we allowed so many military colleagues and right-wing pundits to get away with the spurious allegation that it was somehow State’s job to come in and fix Iraq after the military-led occupation started going sour? How have we failed to make the public understand the limitations on what even hundreds of unarmed diplomats can realistically accomplish in the middle of a combat zone wracked by civil war?

We at AFSA will keep doing our best to set the record straight in the public mind. At every opportunity, we have drawn attention to the numbers:

- Since 2003, more than 2,000 State Department Foreign Service members (out of a total pool of only 11,000) have volunteered for war-zone assignments in Iraq or Afghanistan;
- The total Foreign Service is less than one-half of 1 percent of the size of the U.S. military, and our members are already stretched thin staffing all the other 260 embassies and consulates worldwide, a majority of which are hardship posts;
- Until now, we have filled every position at Embassy Baghdad and the PRTs with willing volunteers; not a single person has had

to be ordered to go.

The facts tell of a tough, dedicated, patriotic corps of skilled foreign-affairs professionals who have stepped up to the plate in Iraq, yet we continue to take the heat for lack of progress there. The undignified and unwarranted finger-pointing by certain people at the Pentagon eager to lay the blame at the feet of the State Department Foreign Service is becoming more and more overt.



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Maybe it is time for a candid public discussion of the limitations on what diplomats assigned to a besieged embassy or to provincial teams embedded with U.S. military units in the middle of an active combat zone can realistically be expected to accomplish.

After my recent testimony, one member of Congress pulled me aside and asked why on earth State has not sent thousands of Foreign Service officers to Iraq to oversee the “postwar” reconstruction and establishment of a democratic government, “as we did after World War II” in Germany and Japan. This often-cited description of the post-World War II period is utterly false. First, we did not send thousands of FSOs to Germany and Japan; rather, the reconstruction/rebuilding was supervised by generals, logistics officers, engineering officers and civil affairs officers of the U.S. military occupation. Second, the reconstruction and development of democratic institutions in Germany and Japan only took place once the war was over and hostilities had ended. This is obviously not the case in Iraq. In addition, where would we get thousands of FSOs without leaving most of our other 260 diplomatic missions around the world significantly understaffed or vacant?

Our Foreign Service members have courageously volunteered to staff the embassy and PRTs and lend their diplomatic skills to the U.S. effort there over the past four years. They are doing their best under extremely adverse conditions. But, as the SIGIR report noted, their ability to succeed depends on the security situation and on progress of the overall war effort led by the military.

We all recognize that both the military and the Foreign Service have been handed a daunting task in Iraq. Castigating the dedicated people of the Foreign Service for the current impasse is an appalling attempt to play the blame game. □