

The Dawn of a New Iraq: The Story Americans Almost Missed

Colonel Daniel L. Baggio
United States Army

The January 30, 2005 Iraqi election was clearly a watershed event for Iraq, as well as for the United States and its coalition partners. It marked the highlight and truly the culminating point of my nearly 14 months in Iraq. As an American Soldier and a member of III Corps and the Multi-National Corps Iraq (MNC-I), I was proud to be a part of it and I was even more delighted for the Iraqi people as they took a gigantic leap on the path to democracy. From a public affairs perspective, the story of this election was probably the one widest covered single day event, second only to the capture of Saddam Hussein 13 months earlier. What is not well known to most is the story behind the scenes – the story that American troops were nearly “gagged” from telling their stories and the role they played on this Election Day. If it were not for the hard work, dedication, moral integrity, and intestinal fortitude of a handful of Corps and Division level Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), the American audience may very well have been robbed of this historical day, rich in significance and emotion. This is my story from my perspective and perception of reality as the MNC-I PAO. The names, dates and times herein are accurate to the best of my memory and any mistakes or omissions are not intentional. It is my intent is to tell this story and show how a well-meaning bureaucratic decision at higher headquarters nearly stymied a strategic success.

In the weeks leading up to the historic January 2005 elections in Iraq, we in the Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) Public Affairs Office had developed a comprehensive plan to publicize important aspects of pre-election preparations together with whatever events might unfold during that historically important day. Part of that plan included having obtained clearance to have Fox News reporter Geraldo Rivera cover events from the command’s Joint Operations Center (JOC) in Baghdad. During the preparation phase of this plan, we arranged for Rivera to visit several units “outside the

wire,” including accompanying mounted and dismounted patrols in Mosul. This preparation phase culminated with us dropping him off in Tikrit two days prior to the election for a final sensing of the Iraqi population.¹

However, on the night two days prior to the election, the MNC-I Chief of Staff called me in to inform me that higher headquarters had made a last minute decision not to permit interviews with MNC-I forces on election day. This was a stunning development owing to the many commitments that had been made to the media. Fortunately, we were able to negotiate a modification to the guidance that permitted interviews with battalion and lower level elements. However, we were unable to clear media access for interviews at Headquarters MNC-I. This placed us in a very difficult position with Rivera, potentially placing him and his network in a bad position at virtually the last minute; and, compromising our ability to show an immensely important dimension of what we believed was going to be a great and vitally needed story.²

Now the stage is set for this story, providing the readers with just enough flavor and context of where and how my colleagues and I got to this historic place in space and time. And, of course, I promise not to leave the readers hanging in suspense, but will achieve closure by telling the “Paul Harvey”³ and disclosing how we remedied this situation and ultimately enjoyed at least some limited success on the strategic media battlefield scene.

Background from January 2004 – January 2005

As I look back on the months, weeks, and days leading up to the first free Iraqi elections, I was very skeptical about both the Iraqis’ and our ability to fulfill the promise and successfully “pull it off.” I always kept these doubts buried deep inside me but exuded an optimistic front to friends, colleagues, acquaintances and most casual observers. I always thought and still think we were morally right in going after Saddam Hussein. Unlike some, I believe that there was ample justification in addition to going after weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and to this day, do not eliminate the possibility that these WMD may have been moved. However, my doubts about the elections stemmed from the apparent discord among the

Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) and the lack of infrastructure and sophistication of the Iraqi people. It was not that I didn't think that the Iraqis could eventually have free elections, but frankly to expect them to get their act together in a year's time, I believed was very ambitious – to say the least. Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and the lot of our American founding fathers – who declared independence in 1776 – took eleven years to get the United States Constitution written and two more years to put it into effect in 1789 with George Washington as our President. Needless to say, it was astonishing to me that the first round of Iraqi elections indeed happened on January 30, 2005.

The Journey: Deploying from Fort Hood to Iraq

The day came when we finally deployed – the weeks of anxiety and anticipation passed and it was time to go. I drew my 9mm Beretta Pistol at the HHC (Headquarters and Headquarters Company), III Corps Arms Room, Fort Hood, Texas around dusk on January 8, 2004. After dropping off my two duffle bags and one parachute kit bag with all my personal belongings and equipment, we went to a gymnasium with a nice send-off ceremony, which allowed us about an hour to say goodbye to our loved ones. After that we were quarantined and moved out by bus to Fort Hood's huge Abrams Field House, which was nicely converted to a manifest site replete with all the very efficient last minute checks of wills, medical records – to include last minute shots – dog-tags, etc., as well as good food, music, books, video games, board games, stationary and telephones to pass the time until we boarded our planes.

We departed sometime in the pre-dawn morning hours of January 9, 2004. After just one short stop in Germany at the U.S. Rhein-Main Air Base on the south side of Frankfurt Airport, we arrived during a monsoon-like downpour of rain in Kuwait City, Kuwait, followed by an hour or so bus ride to a stopover “tent city” called Camp Wolverine, Kuwait. I never knew the desert could be so wet and cold as we crowded about 30/40 people into GP (General Purpose) large tents which leaked like sieves.

We left Kuwait in multiple waves of C-130 Hercules airplanes on January 11, 2004. My flight was a rousing harbinger of things to come

as the pilot dropped flares and took evasive measures when our plane was shot at on approach to Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) by some sort of small hand held missile – probably an RPG. It was a blessing that nobody vomited, although many looked white as ghosts. We landed safely at approximately 2100 hours, took roll call, boarded buses and drove to Camp Victory (named for V Corps).

After in-processing and orientation to the operations of Combined and Joint Task Force Seven (CJTF-7) at Camp Victory, (it was January 14 or 15 when) I got to experience my first wild ride down the infamous stretch of road know as “The Airport Road” or “Route Irish” (for the University of Notre Dame based on a naming convention in an early operations plan [OPLAN] that used college team names for various routes) to the International Zone, better known as the “Green Zone” of Baghdad, where the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was headquartered. After a mission brief, I was whisked away in a soft-skinned sports utility vehicle driven by a U.S. Marine Corporal at over 90 miles per hour. I learned soon that this young corporal and the majority of the other 60 or so troops I would inherit believed in the mantra “speed means security” – if that was true, I was certainly secure!

CJTF-7 Grounding: My Days as CPIC Director in the International Zone (IZ)

CJTF-7 was the military headquarters and CPA was the political headquarters. My job initially was as the Coalition Press Information Center (CPIC) Director. The CPIC supported both CJTF-7 and CPA, but the military personnel belonged to CJTF-7. The plan was for my unit (III Corps, from Fort Hood, Texas) to replace V Corps from Heidelberg, Germany as the core of CJTF-7. I spent the next 10 days or so doing “left-seat-right-seat” transition with my predecessor, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Kevin Gainer, a swell guy. Kevin was a real quiet guy – an unlikely hero, who earned a purple heart from multiple shrapnel wounds during the makeshift MLRS (multi-rocket launcher system) attack of the Al Rashid Hotel on October 26, 2003; this attack was responsible for the death of a U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel.⁴ Although injured, LTC Gainer was stalwart in helping to evacuate other Soldiers and especially

civilians who were panicking during the attack. Interesting enough, this attack marked the beginning of things to come – it happened just a day after the 14th of July Bridge over the Tigris River was reopened and the very day the curfew over Baghdad was lifted. Bear in mind that we were not calling these attacks and resistance an “insurgency” at this time.

My first real taste of the war came at just about 0800 Baghdad time on January 18, 2004 during my transition with LTC Gainer. We were about to have our morning CPIC meeting, when a huge explosion literally rocked our building. The concussion was so loud, we actually thought our building was hit by something. It turned out to be a huge car bomb or VBIED (vehicle borne improvised explosive device) using a Toyota truck loaded with over 1,000 pounds of plastic explosive and several 155mm artillery shells “daisy-chained” together, which exploded at the “Assassin’s Gate” leading into the Green Zone – less than 300 meters from the CPIC. Within minutes Colonel Bill Darley, the CJTF-7 PAO, dispatched Kevin and me, with a team of Combat Camera to the scene to witness first hand and record the damage and carnage. The scene was bizarre, almost surreal in a lot of ways to me. I’ll never forget the smell – the odor was like an almost sickening sweet barbeque with metallic overtones. I remember the scene – it was a mangled mess of burning or burnt, twisted vehicles, including a bus full of people on their way to work. There was charred and greasy debris all over the place, including chunks of meat, which on inspection were pieces of human flesh. One poignant sight was a car with what appeared to be a woman in the passenger side huddling over to protect a baby or small toddler she was holding. All the bodies were little more than skeletons covered with black melted tar-like flesh, barely recognizable as humans. Estimates of the carnage varied. The Associated Press reported on January 19: “Latest figures show 24 people were killed and about 120 injured in the weekend truck bombing at a gate to the headquarters compound of the U.S.-led coalition, the Iraqi Health Minister said Monday. U.S. officials put the casualty toll at ‘about 20’ dead and 63 injured.”⁵

During the next four months as the CPIC Director for CJTF-7, I experienced several other incidents to include rocket and mortar

attacks, and road movements just ahead of IED (improvised explosive device) attacks or caught in traffic jams just behind IED attacks. And although my personal safety was probably more threatened by these later attacks, nothing had a singularly profound effect on me like that first baptism at Assassin's Gate.

CJTF-7 Splits: Welcome MNF-I and MNC-I

On May 15, 2004, CJTF-7 officially split into two headquarters. The warfighting tactical/operational command became known as Multi-National Corps Iraq, with III Corps as its core, under the leadership of Lieutenant General (LTG) Thomas F. Metz. The political/strategic headquarters was called Multi-National Forces Iraq, initially with LTG Ricardo Sanchez from V Corps remaining in command, until General George Casey replaced him on July 1, 2004. By request of Brigadier General (BG) Mark Kimmitt, I stayed on at the CPIC through the first two days of the Abu Ghraib detainee abuse trials, which were major media events that used the CPIC as the venue, through the release of 24 detainees from Abu Ghraib on May 24, 2004.

Move to Camp Victory as MNC-I PAO

Late May 2004, was a happy time for me to rejoin my III Corps brethren at Camp Victory. By all indications, LTG Metz seemed thrilled to have his staff back under his command – I know I was happy to be back in the fold. My able deputy and plans officer from Fort Hood (MAJ Scott Bleichwehl) and the PAO Sergeant Major (SGM Eric Parris) greeted me with open arms. During the next few weeks we put together a PAO staff and established physical work spaces to accommodate them in our newly renovated headquarters building, which was formerly known as Saddam Hussein's Al Faw Palace and referred to by Americans as the "Water Palace." We also focused on purchasing SUVs and sophisticated satellite broadcast equipment called DVIDS (Defense Visual Information Distribution Systems), among other innovations as we prepared to tell the MNC-I story and serve as an advocate for the divisions and other subordinate formations.

Operation Al-Fajr or Phantom Fury: The Retaking of Fallujah

The period from June 2004 to January 2005 saw MNC-I tackle multiple operations and myriad activities. Pertinent to setting the conditions for successful Iraqi elections were a number of shaping operations in partnership with the fledgling Iraqi government. The last major push to set the conditions was the much-anticipated return to Fallujah, a town held captive and used as a safe-haven for insurgents. The operation was known as Operation Al-Fajr – which means “The Dawn” in Arabic; the original name was Operation Phantom Fury – this was changed to better resonate with the Iraqi people, since the idealistic goal was to take Fallujah from the insurgents and give it back to the good people of Fallujah. Operation Al-Fajr lasted about six weeks – starting in early November 2004 and wrapping up in late December 2004. From a coalition perspective we believed it was not only a tactical victory, but we gained some traction in strategic information credibility with the capture of evidence of several bomb making factories, torture chambers, human slaughter houses, weapons caches (including many in mosques), and insurgent broadcasting and film-making equipment. In contrast, interesting enough, there were wide differences in media coverage – some left leaning press and bloggers were quick to criticize this as a “war crime within a war crime” even going as far as wrongly characterizing the use of white phosphorus illumination rounds as evidence of illegal chemical weapons.⁶

Media Coverage Plans for the January 2004 Iraqi Elections

As the military typically does, this being no exception, there was a concerted effort over time to plan for the MNF-I/MNC-I support plan for the Iraqi elections. The planning had been going on for months. The media coverage plan was also being worked at multiple levels.

The overall military goal of the election from an information perspective was to tout the bravery and improvement of the Iraqi Army and National Guard, and emphasize that we, the Coalition Forces, were in direct support of the Iraqi Forces. This top-down guidance was well disseminated, in my opinion. If you asked

American troops from the most junior private to the most senior general officer, they would repeat the mantra: “We are supporting the Iraqi Forces in their first democratic elections.” The preparedness and quality of the Iraqi Forces was very uneven; in some rare cases “support” might mean a few American advisors with reach-back capability with an Iraqi battalion. In other cases it might mean an American brigade supporting an Iraqi squad. I am not being cynical here; I saw a lot of brave Iraqis – many of whom gave their lives – but it is impossible to grow a military remotely comparable to ours during conflict, on the fly, in such a short period of time. The Iraqis were getting better in most cases, but were clearly not at a level to operate on their own.

One thing that was consistent across the country was the strategy for the Americans and other coalition partners to take a back stage on the “outer cordon” if you will. The image that was not desired and would not be tolerated was a polling place with non-Iraqis securing the polling box. We must take a back seat. I fundamentally agreed with that philosophy and all the guidance about what we should emphasize and not emphasize was well meant. However, ultimately, there is a need to balance between touting the Iraqis and honestly telling of the roles and missions of the MNC-I troops there. From an American perspective, without compromising operations security (OPSEC), we had a responsibility, in my view, to tell the American public what 160,000 troops (up from 130,000 for the purposes of security and shaping for the election) were doing in Iraq. Though it was well-intended, a sole emphasis on only the Iraqi Forces without acknowledging the Americans and Coalition partners potentially insulted the intelligence of the general population shaped by the media, whose job it is to tell the story and can ultimately hurt the integrity and efficacy of the strategic mission. This is a prelude to the events that transpired within the last 36-48 hours prior to the election.

The Scheme: Where MNC-I Fit in the Chain

At Headquarters, MNC-I, I worked closely and diligently to synchronize or at least de-conflict the embed plans and media operations of all the subordinate divisions and task forces. One of MNC-I PAO’s roles was to act as a mitigating agent for the subordinate formations in

dealings with MNF-I Strategic Communication (STRATCOM); this organization at Headquarters, MNF-I was an umbrella over PAO, Information Operations (IO), and Psychological Operations. The MNF-I Spokesman and MNF-I STRATCOM Director was U.S. Air Force Brigadier General “Irv” Lessel. The CPIC also fell under MNF-I STRATCOM and did not report directly to the MNF-I PAO – which in my mind was not a good construct and a constant point of contention. For the purposes of this paper, I will not get into a lot of detail here, but wish to set the stage by framing where MNC-I fit in the daily chain of command and PAO staff channels, with respect to both our higher and lower echelons.

In addition to working to support both our higher and lower headquarters, MNC-I PAO often had select “high visibility” media directly embedded within the Corps Headquarters to get the perspective of LTG Metz and his staff, but also used the Corps Headquarters as a staging base for multiple trips and related stories in various subordinate unit sectors. At MNC-I PAO, we had a plan and made pledges to embed media for the lead-up and actual execution of the January 2005 elections.

Headquarters MNC-I Media Embed Plan

During the run-up to the election there were a lot of big name media, some of whom essentially invited themselves – the late ABC Anchorman Peter Jennings comes to mind, as well as CNN’s Christiane Amanpour. But there were journalists with whom we had already developed a relationship and established plans for a repeat embed for months. The plan was to give these journalists as much access as possible to tell the story of the elections from our perspective; which was consistent with the approach and stated higher command policy that we were supporting the Iraqis for “their” elections – it was not our show. As New York Times reporter Thom Shanker recalled: “Camp Victory was simply over-run with big name media types in the week or two before the election. Many network anchors were there (one of your comrades was even asked to have one of these anchor’s suits dry cleaned. Dry cleaned???). No doubt that created a manpower issue for your PA staff.”⁷ The two journalists I will focus my story on are Thom Shanker of the

New York Times, who was with us two weeks up till election day and in particular, Fox News' Geraldo Rivera and his spectacular television coverage.

Thom and Geraldo: Great Americans

I personally know or have met hundreds of journalists. Like any group of people from any walk of life, there are some good news media personalities and some bad ones, and a whole lot of them somewhere in the middle. Two gentlemen who I would never hesitate to work with are Thom Shanker and Geraldo Rivera. In many ways these two men are as different as night and day, but they share a passion for telling the real stories of Soldiers and Marines, not from a thousand miles away, but right there with them, sharing the danger, living in the same conditions, and eating the same rations. A PAO should never ask a journalist for a "good" story, but he or she has a right to expect a fair story. As a military PAO I have always ascertained and strongly believe that our story, especially at the unit level – warts and all – is fundamentally a good story. Allowing access to "fair" journalists will get you a good story more often than not. Thom and Geraldo get it right and have delivered great stories about our men and women in Iraq.

Thom Shanker has the honor of being the first true embedded reporter with MNC-I. He interviewed and established a rapport with LTG Metz before we ever departed Fort Hood and initially arrived in Baghdad soon after the MNC-I breakaway from CJTF-7, in May 2004. The interpersonal relationship and trust we built with Thom paid big dividends. As a PAO, it is a good day when the morning starts out with your boss on the front page above the fold of the New York Times in a positive piece.

Thom is a very thoughtful and intellectual guy; he is thorough and checks his facts with multiple sources – a consummate professional. He has a warm and very polite personality. Although on the surface he may seem rather introverted, once you get to know him, his witty charm and sense of humor shine through. Realizing full well that PAOs must supposedly be careful about crossing the line of familiarity vice professional relationships with media to ensure objectivity, I can say with a clear conscience that I consider Thom a

dear friend who has shared wartime experiences with me and I have absolutely no concerns about any professional compromise.

Geraldo Rivera is a household name; his name usually strikes a chord with people either in a positive way or a negative way – not much in-between. What a lot of people do not realize, is that Geraldo has worked for every major network and cable network, with successful shows on all and has continually redefined himself. Both an entertainer and truly gifted journalist – his passion and enthusiasm are always apparent.

The work Geraldo has done in both telling our story and lifting the morale of our Soldiers, Marines, Airmen, and Sailors is under-appreciated in my view. He is human and made an unintentional mistake with the infamous “Map in the Sand” episode during the invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom – but nobody was harmed because of the error. He apologized and has done a world of good for our servicemen and women since then.

In my view, Geraldo is truly a brave man – those who criticize him for exaggerating and glamorizing himself have not likely been around him during peril. The first time I met him was via the phone in February 2004 when he and his crew were attacked while driving from Tikrit in the 4th Infantry Division’s AO (Area of Operations) heading toward Task Force Olympia’s and the “Stryker Brigade” AO in Mosul. He was on the phone with the CPIC media desk at one time, with the sound of small arms gun fire very audible. I found him equally brave in person in two other incidents; the first was on a foot patrol in Mosul two days prior to the election and the other on the Election Day in an open courtyard at the police station in Saba Al Boor – west of Baghdad. I will describe these in some more detail and will also share a story that will put him in perspective and give you an insight to the man that Geraldo really is.

Pre-election Embeds: Thom and Geraldo Arrive

Thom Shanker arrived at Headquarters, MNC-I around the middle of January 2005; this was his third visit. He stated: “During my two weeks at MNC-I ahead of the election, I conducted interviews on a wide variety of topics with a large number of officers involved.

The themes included the transition to local control by the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces], with coalition forces moving into a stand-back/overwatch role; the changing make-up of the insurgency; and progress in standing up Iraqi Security Forces.”⁸ His recollection clearly supports my premise that the U.S. and Coalition Forces clearly knew their “lane” in terms of where we fit into the picture and what the important messages were that needed to be communicated. Another point, which I will magnify in a moment, Shanker also observed was: “...And I seem to recall that one order came down from the top, whether MNF-I or the Third Deck at the Pentagon I don’t know, that only Iraqi faces should be on TV. So it helped that I had been there so many times before, and worked for print media.”⁹

Geraldo Rivera arrived on January 25 and his crew arrived a few days earlier as I recall on or about January 22. This was his second embed with MNC-I. The logistical challenge for Geraldo’s team was that they were traveling with about 2,500–3,000 pounds of gear to include a mini-studio for his live TV show broadcasts. He sent his team in a few days ahead to set-up and scout out potential venues and get some story ideas. The biggest difference between the broadcast media (television in particular) and the print media are the visuals. You need to find stories and backdrops that are visually stimulating for TV and that can be packaged for maximum impact and short time. TV can have an immediate impact and wide appeal to broad audiences, but the disadvantage of television is that the stories tend to be only an inch deep with little shelf life; this is why that although both television and print media are relevant, the needs of TV and the requirements of units and PAOs supporting TV tend to be much higher. While Thom Shanker was off interviewing several key leaders for his in-depth pieces, we had to start to work hard right away, as Geraldo was ready to get out there and tell stories.

Geraldo’s Plan and Chance Meeting with LTG Metz

While walking back to my office in the palace after dinner at our new Camp Victory Dining Facility – new since Geraldo’s last visit in June 2004¹⁰ – we discussed the venue for his Election Day coverage. Geraldo pitched an idea about having what could be described as an

“election day return central” from the Joint Operations Center (JOC), from which he would broadcast his special two-hour live show and give periodic live updates to Fox News throughout the day. As we walked up the spiral marble staircase leading to my office, we had a chance meeting engagement with LTG Metz, who was coming down the stairs. Geraldo, not known for his shyness, came right out and pitched his idea to LTG Metz. LTG Metz was favorably disposed to the idea and we seemed to have the green light to carry on with this JOC venue plan. Over the next few days the Fox engineers worked closely with the MNC-I security and electronic experts to figure out and hard wire the JOC for the election return coverage. This effort was completed in parallel and simultaneously with Geraldo’s news trips around the Iraq Area of Operations.

Weapons Cache: Geraldo Visits TF 2-12 Cavalry AO

Bright and early on the morning of January 26, 2005, Geraldo, cameraman Christian Galdibini, and I flew from the Camp Victory Helipad to meet with LTC Tim Ryan, Commander, Task Force 2-12 Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, in his AO near the Iraqi town of Latifiyah, south of Baghdad near the Euphrates River. Three days earlier, Tim’s troops discovered a huge buried cache of weapons, munitions and explosives, in eight separate locations. They were helped by local Iraqi farmers turned informants who wanted to get on with their lives and were disenfranchised by the insurgents. This cache (actually a field of over 100 caches) extended over acres of sand dunes with countless high explosive rounds to include tons of field artillery, anti-aircraft, and tank rounds, as well as ten 1,000 pound FROG 7 warheads. The 2-12 Cavalry with a contingent of Iraqi National Guard were excavating sites and blowing them up in place. We spent all day with the 2-12 Cav and returned in the early evening. That night Geraldo put together a piece that aired that afternoon (back in the U.S.) on Fox News. LTC Ryan and the Task Force Baghdad (1st Cavalry Division) PAO, LTC James Hutton, had been trying to get journalists to go out and cover this good news story – most media were either afraid or didn’t want to bother with going out in the sticks to cover the story or both. No problem for Geraldo – we pitched the story and he conservatively turned it in to a triple, if not a homerun.

Of note, was that this would have only been a night for bad news – if we didn't have this coverage of a positive development. The big story that day was tragedy; a Marine Corps helicopter crashed, killing 31 total – I believe it was 30 Marines and 1 Navy corpsmen. This event, unbeknownst to me at the time, had a profound impact on Geraldo Rivera. I found out about this impact two days later, as will be revealed later in this monograph.

Long Cold Helicopter Flight from Baghdad to Mosul to Tikrit to Baghdad

January 27, 2005 was another huge day for telling the warriors' story – we flew to Mosul to spend the day with Task Force Olympia – replete with mounted Stryker Patrols, dismounted foot patrols, and an opportunity for Thom Shanker and Geraldo Rivera to accompany GEN Casey and LTG Metz, while BG Ham (Task Force Olympia Commanding General) gave them briefings and a tour of election preparations under way.

The group consisted of my deputy (Major Scott Bleichwehl) and me as the PAO escorts, Thom Shanker, and Geraldo with a crew of two – producer/ cameramen Greg Hart and cameramen Christian Galdibini. The helicopter ride to and from was one of the coldest I can ever remember, which is quite a statement, considering I was a former Air Assault Battalion Operations Officer in Korea. As Thom Shanker recalls it in an email:

You (LTC Baggio) and Scott (Major Bleichwehl) and Geraldo and I flew up in a Black Hawk. You and Scott were wearing DCUs (Desert Camouflage Uniform) and your body armor. No cold-weather gear visible. You and Geraldo sat in the front seat; Scott and I in back. Doors open. It was freezing cold. The flight home that night was even worse. The nighttime temperature clearly was far below freezing; add to that the chill of a 50-knot or so wind. I saw you rubbing your Ranger tab to stay warm, a story I have told many times to your Ranger comrades when I meet them...And we had to stop at Balad and refuel.¹¹

One of the funniest things I remember was watching Geraldo during the flight and his body language as we became colder and colder. The pilots put Geraldo up front next to the door gunner to get a

good look. As one would expect, at first all of us were excited and attentive to peering out the doors-open helicopter and viewing a big slice of the Iraqi landscape. I was freezing, but trying not to show it. After several minutes Geraldo began rearranging luggage to try to block the wind and covered himself with a makeshift blanket of suitcases and duffle bags – he looked miserable. At one point – I believe it was at our refueling point in Camp Anaconda, Balad – Geraldo looked me straight in the eye and dead-panned: “Next time I’m flying coach.”

On the ground bright and early at Mosul, we linked up with the new TF Olympia PAO. We spent the first part of the day with Company A, 1-24th Infantry Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. We were given a situational update and briefing of the AO in the company command post and then we loaded up in Strykers and went on a mounted patrol. We were given an excellent orientation of the AO and even stopped at a forward platoon command post on a four or five story building in Mosul. While we were on patrol in the Strykers, there was a mortar attack in our vicinity. We raced to a dismount point and pursued the pinpoint of the launch on foot patrol. Inside this residential area, the streets were narrow and dirty, within a maze of two to four story town-house type buildings. We found a spot in a run-down playground that appeared to be burn marks which may have been the launch point of a rocket or some type of mortar. While on patrol we encountered small arms fire apparently coming from one of these close quartered buildings within our sector. We were maneuvering from building to building staying close to the walls; Major Bleichwehl and I maintained accountability of the journalists and made sure they were not too bold for their own good.

What really struck me that day and made me proud to be an American Soldier, especially witnessed by the journalists, was the calm and collected way these young officers, non-commissioned officers, and junior Soldiers conducted their business. They went door-to-door politely asking people for any information about who might have launched mortars or was taking poorly-aimed (Thank God!) rifle shots at us. These guys, our Soldiers, were unflappable – at the request of Geraldo, they also took an informal poll, asking folks if

they planned to vote. As I remember it the results were mixed, with some saying “yes” and some saying “no” and I distinctly remember at least one or two saying they weren’t sure, because they did not know who the candidates were. I am not sure how typical this neighborhood was compared to others – I do know that this was a particularly impoverished part of town – there seemed to be a lot of working age men just hanging around with nothing to do. I am not sure of the actual time of our boots on the ground, it was probably an hour but it felt like an eternity. We mounted up and returned to the Stryker Forward Operating Base (FOB). We had been out for about three hours.

The day’s efforts contributed to some great stories of Soldiers doing a tough job. According to Thom: “At one point during the trip to Mosul, we visited an FOB in the AO of Lt. Col. Erik Kurilla. His troops had set up a sniper position and overwatch in a bombed-out building. While all the generals and reporters were milling about, a car bomb went off just a few hundred yards away.” The visit resulted in a spot story on pre-election preparations, which was released on January 28.¹² Geraldo got a lot of B-roll (short for “background-roll” – which is camera footage used for filler or visual context in a story) and some small snippets and sound bytes that were interspersed throughout the day on Fox News.

That night about 2300 or so, we dropped Geraldo and crew off in Tikrit in the 1st Infantry Division’s AOR. The plan was for them to spend the night and interview the Commanding General, MG Batiste and see the preparations being done in Saddam Hussein’s home town. We left him with the 1st Infantry Division PAO and proceeded by to Camp Victory.

No American Faces: BG Troy Breaks the News

I remember that night, upon my return, when BG William “Bill” Troy, the MNC-I Chief of Staff, came into my office. It was late, around 0100 in the morning on the 28th I think. He told me to sit down, which made me worry. Thoughts raced through my head. What happened? Why was he trying to break something gently to me? Were my wife and kids and parents OK? Then he started in: “I know how hard you have worked to plan the media interface for

Election Day, especially the embed with Geraldo... Look, there's been a change to a "no American faces" policy. Also, Geraldo will not be able to operate out of the JOC as planned." I just about lost it!!!! I understood and the troops understood the sensitivities about giving the Iraqis their due, but in my opinion this was short-sighted and did not answer the mail to the American public about what our 160,000 troops were doing in Iraq. Ideas like this are the same types of things that lose confidence with the American public and encourage discussion of "spin" or should I dare say "propaganda" on the part of the U.S. military.

I started working it hard – that very night or rather morning. One voice of reason was USAF Colonel Jerry Renne. He was the MNF-I STRATCOM PAO – a deputy to Brig Gen Lessel (not to be confused with the Army Colonel who was General Casey's PAO). Colonel Renne helped to get a modification. Anyway, I remember pushing back; my very vocal resistance was rewarded with a modification in the policy that allowed only lieutenant colonels and below to talk. Still, no generals or full-colonels could be interviewed and no media were allowed in the Joint Operations Center (JOC) on Election Day and nothing at the Headquarters, MNC-I level. This was still not satisfactory, but much better than a totally no-American face policy.

Breaking the Bad News to Geraldo

It was sometime in the early afternoon, as I recall, on January 28; we were only about 36 hours away from the first free elections in Iraq and my invited media guest, Geraldo, who we planned on since June, was being told to go away. I felt plain awful and literally sick to my stomach as I made my way out to the helipad to meet Geraldo and break the bad news to him – it was not fun being me at that moment. Returning from Tikrit, the helicopter landed, then there was a scurry of activity as Geraldo and crew passed boxes of gear and luggage from under the rotors. I studied Geraldo closely, still trying to figure out what I was going to say to him. With a bag on his right shoulder and dragging a wheeled suitcase with his left arm, the mustachioed Mr. Rivera came charging out from under the blades. In an effortless one stroke, one armed flip, he removed his black

Kevlar helmet, grabbed it in his right arm and joined it with the bag on his right shoulder, his hair blowing wildly in the helicopter blast.

Both the concerns of ruining our reputation and credibility with Fox and Geraldo in particular, as well as our ability to tell this key bit of MNC-I (and frankly III Corps) history weighed heavily on me as we scrambled to find alternatives not only as a professional responsibility, but as a matter of honor, believing that the broken commitment could easily be perceived as a betrayal of trust. The anxiety apparently showed on my face as I trudged to the helipad to meet Mr. Rivera on his return from Tikrit. As Geraldo saw me walk towards him, he looked at me and asked me what was wrong. I paused and then said: “Geraldo I’ve got some bad news.”

His chin dropped, his face became tensely serious, and his eyes narrowed with concern, and he said: “What’s wrong, what happened?”

“Well,” I began, “Though I know that we had committed to support your coverage of the election from here, for reasons I am not at liberty to explain, we have to cancel your access to the MNC-I (JOC).”

At that point, his eyes opened and his face regained its composure, and he let out a clearly audible gasp of relief. Our helmets were off; he then physically grabbed my head, with his left hand behind the nape of my neck, and placed his forehead on my forehead – skin to skin – and said: “Is that all?” Continuing he said, “Man, you had me worried. I thought you were going to tell me another helicopter with troops was shot down or something like that – Man, am I relieved!” After briefly discussing our efforts to find alternative ways to cover the election, he then said, “Don’t sweat it; this is just bureaucratic B.S.; we’ll figure something out.”¹³

That moment was the defining one in my relationship with Geraldo. I went from pre-judging him as an entertainer and sensational journalist before I met him, to liking him and trusting him the first time we worked together, to this point...and I will say it to anyone’s face...I learned to love him like a brother. Sure Geraldo Rivera is

flamboyant, but his emotion and passion is real – what you see on camera is who he truly is and there is nothing phony about him.

Thom Shanker Departs on Election Eve

During Thom Shanker's embed, he conducted interviews with Generals Casey, Metz, Chiarelli and Ham. Thom Shanker departed Iraq with five great stories about the election – one which was released prior to the elections¹⁴ and four written, but held-up for later release. His stories often required visits to distal ends of the country for him to get a true sense or feel of the country. One day he went out on patrol with a brigade of the 10th Mountain Division (which had folded under 1st Cavalry Division). He focused on pre-election security, especially liaison with local police units in the area of operations. A story released on the 30th was a combination about pre-election patrols and hard work in both the Abu Ghraib slums of Baghdad and in Mosul.¹⁵ Then there was his "big election story" which he talks about below, focused on pre-election security, especially liaison with local police units in its AO. Thom's ability and willingness to write these rich kinds of stories, reinforced why it was important to engage the American media with American military. Thom wrote me in an email:

...the big piece I filed on Election Day, and ran the day after the voting. I landed back in DC to be on station to cover the political aftermath of the Iraqi vote. But I was called in straight from the airport to write a page-one story about all of the clever and outside-the-box things the coalition had done to deter and prevent violence. They are all listed in the story I sent you (which should be at the bottom of this e-mail). They included General Metz's orders to stockpile supplies so he could halt convoy traffic; pushing as many combat troops out of the FOBs as possible; set up fake polling places ahead of the vote to draw insurgent attack, and then announce the real ones just 48 hours in advance so the insurgents would have difficulty in targeting; setting up a daisy chain of searches for women voters; printing new I.D.s for Iraq police and police cars to prevent impersonators. This story, which was chased the next day by most of the mainstream media, would not have been possible without the access I was afforded over the two-week embed. The agreement, of course, was that those tactics, techniques and procedures could not be written in advance. But

the story, which ran the day after the election, informed the readers about all of the very clever planning and execution done by the coalition to produce an election day that surprised all with the low level of violence.¹⁶

Salvation: 256th ESB from Louisiana to the Rescue

The scramble was on. We were now more or less 36 hours out from elections and as gracious as Geraldo was, I knew it was only because of his faith in Major Bleichwehl and me to come through for him and his crew as we always had. As a matter of fact, Geraldo had so much confidence in our abilities to sort it out as I recall, he arranged to fly to the Green Zone with the intent of interviewing some of the high rollers at the political level. The crown jewel of his trip – and I don't remember the details of how he set it up – was an exclusive interview with Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

So the new guidance was unit level, rubber meets the road sort of stuff. My first call was to my fellow Fort Hood brethren and logistically closest unit, Task Force Baghdad. As it turned out, the Task Force Baghdad and 1st Cavalry Division's Public Affairs Officer, LTC James Hutton, was able to set up a visually rich opportunity at a police station in Saba Al Boor, supported by the 256th Enhanced Separate Brigade (ESB) of the Louisiana National Guard. Ironically, the change of venue resulted in some of the most dramatic and famous coverage of Election Day. Rivera reported from polling stations and featured the work of the Soldiers of the 256th that demonstrated the great effort that had gone into making the election a resounding statement of success.¹⁷

The way I remember it, is that my faith in prior coordination was now somewhat shaken, considering the events over the last few hours which rendered not only handshakes, but written plans obsolete. I did not assume LTC Hutton's suggestion was a done deal. I rechecked with him to ensure that this was communicated via the 1st Cavalry chain to his Commanding General, Major General (MG) Peter Chiarelli, and back down to the unit. I also coordinated directly to the 256th ESB to get a sense of the climate there and see if it would be a good match. And, of course I ran it up the chain to MNF-I STRATCOM, to make sure they had no heartburn.

So when I was comfortably sure that we were locked in, I called Geraldo – still at the International Zone, to brief him up. I called him enthusiastically, prepared for the hard sell – but I did not have to sell hard. Geraldo graciously and sincerely said, “I’m sure it will be great. I’ll see you tomorrow morning and we’ll work all the details.”

So it is now election eve back at Camp Victory. Geraldo’s plan now is to do a two hour live show from 0600 to 0800 Baghdad time, which I believe was 2200 to 2400 EST. For anyone who has never worked with this kind of format, it requires moving in and out to keep Americans’ short attention span interested. This means there are requirements for short prepackaged stories and interviews as well as guests standing by in studios around the world to be brought on the show. Geraldo literally brings the studio to him in virtual reality, while on location. A lot of work and it all seems easy to moms and dads sitting home in America watching.

LTG Metz: Interview in the JOC

Geraldo really wants to interview LTG Metz. LTG Metz sincerely feels bad that we could not do the Election Day show in the JOC – but “orders is orders” as my old first sergeant used to say. What I suggest is that he interview the general today – the day before the election; the General is not opposed to my suggestion that he interview with Geraldo the day before the election, but he has a caveat. LTG Metz tells me, “OK Dan, but I want you to make sure that MNF-I is OK with this. General Lessel (USAF Brig Gen, MNF-I STRATCOM) needs to ensure GEN Casey is read-in and approves.” After phone calls back and forth, it is a done deal – the interview is on – in the JOC. It is now after dinner and we are less than 12 hours from election time on January 29, 2005. The beautiful part is that this interview – in which LTG Metz was awesome – was one of those packaged pieces that was played on Geraldo’s live show on Election Day. The show aired EST in the states at 2200 on the 29th – once again technically not Election Day. So the bottom line is that I did not violate the letter of guidance, but we got the same net result and I would say even better, because we got visuals of the JOC incorporated into the show, but the original plan was not nearly as

exciting as what was to be. Also, to jump ahead for the record, the post election feedback from the Pentagon and MNF-I was positive.

After the interview LTG Metz apologized to Geraldo for any hardship the last-minute changes had caused him and offered any support he could to include the use of his helicopter to transport the crew back to Camp Victory after the elections. We did take advantage of this offer; our extraction plan was now set.

Convoy to Saba Al Boor

It was now about 2000 hours on January 29; the plan, I believe was to link-up around midnight in the 256th ESB motor pool, located at Camp Victory North (renamed by 1st Cavalry Division as Camp Liberty). We then had to cross-load the 3,000 pounds of Fox News' equipment between about a dozen vehicles on a pitch black night, in preparation for an SP (Start Point) time of 0100 as I recall. The vehicles were so full, that Major Bleichwehl actually borrowed our Corps historian's armored HMMWV to gain a few seats; we were short a seat and Major Johnson (the historian) graciously relinquished his seat and stayed back.

I was tired – I don't think Scott and I even went to bed that night prior to the convoy to the election site. I kind of remember going to the latrine trailer for one last quality nature call – a real luxury in otherwise austere conditions – and a shave and face wash. I may have taken a 30-minute cat-nap, which was my normal procedure on these kinds of events. I do know that on the ride over I was nodding off. It was probably just as well that I was sleepy or I might have been real edgy, since I vaguely remember the convoy stopping along the route in what we called "Indian (or Injun) Country" several times during my sleepy stupor.

Preparation for the Show

We arrived at the Saba Al Boor Police Station around 0200. Once we parked the vehicles, we inventoried all the equipment, then helped Geraldo and crew scout out the best location – which was on the roof of the police station – and then helped his crew put the set together. We accomplished all this by a little after 0300, I think.

Geraldo, set up a makeshift office inside and worked on his laptop putting the final touches of his show together. The troops from the 256th ESB set up shop, to include a makeshift command post and placed snipers and 360 degree security around the police station.

One thing interesting to me was talking to and observing our snipers in positions on the roof of the police station. Attached to each modified M-14, 7.62mm Sniper Rifle was a red laser. When you aimed the weapon at a target, you could see the red dot with the naked eye a long way off. Pointing this laser served as quite a deterrent to any would be attacker. During darkness, we saw several men dressed in dark clothes acting in a very suspicious manner, darting in and out and from behind buildings across the street of the police station. They seemed to me to be casing out our position in order to get into a posture to fire something at us.

Like magic, as the snipers trained their rifles on these intruders painting them with the knowing red laser dots, we watched them run away like the cowards they were, without a shot fired. There was a bit of a cat and mouse game, as one or two would probe us again to test the alertness of our snipers, just to be met with our familiar laser dots, which was counteracted again by running out of view. So we knew there were folks out there watching our every move.

The live air time was 0600–0800. Normally, we PAOs will be on the set of these kinds of telecasts about one hour early to help answer last minute questions, hustle to find troops with particular home towns or other unique angles – like two brothers serving, father and son, husband and wife, etc. – and just to make sure the talent and crew have a warm and fuzzy feeling. This meant Scott and I had about two hours to kill before our 0500 show time. So we decided to crawl up in the back of a HMMWV and sleep.

We were so tired, we were giddy. I remember walking up to this vehicle in the parking lot at this police station in the middle of a town in the middle of nowhere. Visions of George Armstrong Custer danced through my head – what if the bad guys decided to do something? The vehicle was cold, dirty and uncomfortable, but we were too tired to care. After crawling in and cramming up together in the back of the HMMWV, we looked at each other and had one of

those simultaneous laughing attacks. It was a therapeutic heartfelt stress reliever. We asked ourselves: “What were we doing out here? We could be back at Camp Victory, but no, not us. Here we both are, two “forty-something” husbands and fathers running around with the media in the “Red Zone” after thirteen months in country and only two weeks or so left before we were going back to our families in Texas. What is wrong with us?” But we had such a good laugh; I remember tears were running down my cheeks. Scott and I made such a good team through all the good days and bad days – at least speaking for myself, our ability to talk, listen, cry, and yell at each other helped me keep sane over 13 months in Iraq. Major Bleichwehl was my right-hand and left-hand man through a lot of sticky situations and will always be my younger brother – our fraternal bond will forever be strong.

Show Time: Dawn of a New Iraq

The live show was fantastic. After several communications tests and making sure the folks in the U.S. were ready to go, it kicked off right on time at 0600. The time of the show was perfect for visuals, as it started off in pitch black and continued through sunrise and full daylight. During the show, off-camera during a commercial break, in response to the beautiful vista and the historic situation, Geraldo’s field producer Greg Hart coined the phrase: “The Dawn of a New Iraq.” Moved by the phrase’s simple, but eloquent symbolic meaning, Geraldo said it on camera and gave the attribution to Greg Hart.

As the first light came up over the horizon, we began to see a flurry of activity as people – men, women, and children – began streaming out into the streets. It was a carnival-like atmosphere with people waving Iraqi flags, ladies delivering flowers to our troops in front of the police station, kids playing and men dancing in the streets and alleys. The reaction by most of us who saw this was joyful emotion. Geraldo’s on-camera emotion was heartfelt and was palpable by all that were there. Really, there was an initial sigh of relief as the first two hours of elections went off without a hitch. My doubts that we or the Iraqi people could ever pull this off were melted away. I truly felt proud to be a part of this historical event.

The show wrapped-up promptly at 0800, followed by hugs and high-fives. Geraldo off-camera was really crying tears of joy. It was an electric atmosphere. The plan now was to eat breakfast and then to take Geraldo and a cameraman on a tour of the local polling place and hopefully interview some Iraqis. The additional footage would be sent back to use during the day for Fox updates and much of it for Geraldo's Sunday night show (early Monday morning Baghdad time) which we would shoot at Camp Victory with two Military Police units. After this, we would pack-up all our gear and get extracted via LTG Metz's flig of helicopters.

Lethal Mortar Attack Does Little to Quell Iraqi Spirit

We all had the opportunity to eat some or part of a military Meal-Ready-to-Eat (MRE). Geraldo went out and returned to the police station and was very happy with the scenes he encountered in town. It was approximately 0930 while we were physically escorting Geraldo Rivera in the flat open court yard at the front of the police station, that we heard the close scream of a mortar. The mortar flew directly over our heads and landed approximately 25–35 meters away from us on the opposite side of a thin retaining wall. The attack resulted in the confirmed death of one Iraqi civilian.

Upon sound recognition of a mortar overhead, we reacted instinctively. Major Bleichwehl and I immediately secured the journalists; we were yelling at them to get down and physically pushed them to the ground to minimize exposure. Minutes after the attack we escorted Geraldo Rivera to the scene, where an Iraqi woman lay dead on her way to vote. This attack was well documented by Geraldo and was the centerpiece of a news segment on national television and incorporated into the next night's show.

The poignant scene of this attack ironically represented both what was wrong with this country and what was right in terms of an indelible spirit of a people yearning to be free. It was striking: on the one side you see Geraldo next to this dead Iraqi woman who was moments earlier vibrant on her way to vote crying out, "Why? Why?" But, the amazing thing to me was that after a period of time – I believe it was within 30 minutes – an ambulance came and took away her body, and then I watched with my own two eyes as people continued

to queue up to vote. These brave people refused to be intimidated by terrorists. This opened my eyes and serves as a touchstone to me whenever I see negative speculation about the future of Iraq. I often remark that in many towns and cities across the U.S., people might not vote at sight of the first rain cloud in the sky – not these folks. This powerful story would not have been told had we not been there to tell it to the American people.

Return to Camp Victory and Preparation for the Next Morning Show

At approximately 1300 on January 30, we said good bye to the 256th ESB and Iraqi troops and police on the scene and to Saba Al Boor. I met an Iraqi Army Lieutenant who was happy for his country, but swelled with emotion and conflicted sadness about separation from his family members due to Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime – he said in very broken English that he had a brother in America (Detroit, I believe) who he has not been in touch with and had no idea how to get in touch with him or whether or not he was even still alive. Before leaving I posed for a picture with him. We all felt a true feeling of satisfied accomplishment, as we prepared to literally leave our small police station and friends in the dust. Two UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters landed in the dusty open field next to the police station. We loaded up our kit and away we went.

As soon as we landed at Camp Victory, our job was to find a venue and unit to do the next morning's show with. We called the operations desk for Headquarters, 89th MP Brigade (which was a III Corps and Fort Hood organic unit) and made arrangements to link up with members of two different MP brigades – units that were either attached to or working with the 89th MPs, but not organic to them. Army Military Police (MP) often deployed piecemeal – one company at a time. As I recall, Headquarters, 89th MPs were preparing for redeployment. The 89th MP Brigade Commander, Colonel Dave Phillips (a great supporter and reliable producer of media engagement), had already departed for Fort Hood and by late January. The 89th MP Operations Desk (in name only) was a mix of folks I did not know. We ended up with a great combination of troops from the 18th MP Brigade, who were members of the North

Carolina National Guard and another group from the 42nd MP Brigade, a Regular Army unit from Fort Lewis, Washington.

The idea was to have Soldiers on the show as a backdrop and to get their reaction to the successful elections of the day prior. One nice touch of the show was when Geraldo presented the troops with hand-made greeting cards from his nephew's elementary school in New Jersey – some of the cards were read live on television. It was another great program and showed Iraqis proudly displaying their purple dyed index fingers, which was their proof that they had voted. It was another two-hour live special (Geraldo's shows are normally one hour) show and a magnificent encore to the earlier day's events.

After the show wrapped-up, the Fox crew packed up all their gear and had well-earned hot breakfast and showers. Major Bleichwehl and I escorted them to Baghdad International Airport for their military flight to Kuwait, enroute back to the U.S.. We said our goodbyes, exchanged manly hugs and kisses, and wished them the best – not so secretly remarking that we wish it were us going back instead. But our day was soon to come. Scott was leaving in about a week and I was going home in a little over two weeks. We both considered this experience the high point of our tour and a very satisfying way to culminate.

Conclusion

Indeed Americans almost missed the elections through the eyes of American troops on the ground, who helped to make this day possible. A short-sighted policy, though well-intended was aimed at giving the Iraqis all the credit – it was Iraq's day. The problem with this is that in its simplicity, the policy ignored the complexity of the global information environment we live in today and myriad audiences. The obvious audience, which was almost intentionally ignored was the American media – whose job it was to tell the story of our American Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen who were giving their lives daily to help this country achieve freedoms and some sort of democracy. It is paramount that the military never lose sight of the difference between truth and fiction. Most people in America, Iraq, and around the world were intelligent enough to

know that 160,000 American troops must have been doing something over in Iraq. To say otherwise or not say anything is an insult to the American people who pay taxes and give their sons, daughters, husbands, wives, parents and friends to serve in our military – many giving the ultimate sacrifice.

As it turned out the coverage was overwhelmingly positive. Our troops were not arrogant and they gave the Iraqis their just due and expressed happiness for the Iraqis, while putting things in their proper context with respect to our mission. The events with Geraldo and Thom Shanker were generally typical of the kind of news being told by embedded reporters with units across the country. All the feedback we received from higher headquarters was very positive. As leaders, PAOs – even at the most tactical level - have ample opportunity to shape the strategic landscape. Like any military officer, at the end of the day PAOs must obey orders. However, it is paramount, that as experts in communication and media relations, we must be vocal in advising the best way ahead and articulate the second and third order effects of poor decisions to mitigate potential media blunders. If I had not pushed back on behalf of the MNC-I and all the Multi-National Divisions and Forces, to tell our story – in particular the American story – in relation to the elections, it would have been a grave blunder indeed.