

Reconstruction of Post-War Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities

On September 22, 2004, Dr. James Haveman was invited by the Paul Henry Institute to talk about the challenges and opportunities involved in the reconstruction of post-war Iraq. Haveman, a Calvin College graduate, worked as the Director of Project Rehab for five years and at Bethany Christian Services, one of the nation's largest child adoption agencies. He then served as the director of the Michigan Department of Community Health from 1996-2003. In April 2003, Haveman received a call from the White House requesting he serve as Senior Advisor for the Ministry of Health in Iraq. In light of his fascination with the cultural, historical and biblical features of the Middle East, and his responsibility as a Reformed Christian to make this a better world and address the fight between good and evil, he accepted the position.

According to Haveman, Saddam single-handedly destroyed the health care system in Iraq through his long-term policy of withholding funding and supplies. After the American invasion, hordes of equipment such as wheelchairs and X-ray machines which had been purchased from other countries were found locked up in warehouses, unused. These actions by Saddam were part of his efforts to blame the United Nations sanctions for a deteriorating health care system in the country. Hospitals and school buildings across the country were dilapidated, due to neglect. Furthermore the overall society in Iraq was abused as "the brutal dictator" kept the people isolated from the rest of the world, completely banning any independent media or freedom of speech. Thousands of mass hangings and the unwarranted detainment of innocent civilians occurred regularly during his regime.

Haveman described a dramatic change in the country since Saddam was ousted from power. The health care system has improved, as the number of professional workers increased and medical equipment was distributed throughout the country. The judicial system is in the process of becoming independent and legitimate, as judges are being trained in proper evidence-collection procedures and how to make fair rulings. The flood of satellite dishes into the country, non-restricted travel, as well as press and internet-access have enabled the Iraqi people to enjoy diversity of opinion and gain knowledge of the world beyond Iraq.

According to Haveman, this new openness and awareness of the world around them explains most of the destruction of the cities during the invasion: it resulted from looting by people who were angry because “they could now see what the rest of the world ha[d].” Haveman asserted that the Iraqi people have welcomed the overthrow of Saddam and that, in fact, there has not been a single suicide bomber who is Iraqi; many of the insurgents are fundamentalists from neighboring Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

When the Iraqi Ministry of Health was judged to be able to administer the health care situation in the country without assistance, Haveman returned to the U.S. He was appalled by the slant in the media depicting Iraqi people as Anti-American and showing Iraq as war-torn and in a dire state. On the contrary, Haveman described a country of beauty and diversity in geography. He believes the people of Iraq to be receptive towards the Americans and pleased that Saddam has been removed from power. The country is tired of the killing and violence caused by the insurgents, and wants peace and freedom.

According to Haveman, the Iraqis knew that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. However, they prefer to now focus on the fact that the dictatorship is over, moving forward with reconstruction of the nation. In conclusion to the lecture, Haveman offered his assessment of the correct path toward the future. He stressed the importance of free elections, of United Nations participation in the reconstruction, and of training Iraqis to take over the roles of leaders and workers in their country. Haveman asserted that we must withhold publicity for terrorists in the media and bring Fallujah back under civil control. It is also important that Americans understand the basic tribalism inherent in Iraqi society and the need for the involvement of the civil society and religious institutions in the reconstruction. Haveman believes there will always be a need for a Western presence in the Middle East to “negate” Islamic fundamentalism. He denied the possibility of civil war or polarization in Iraq, and predicted that occupation will continue for the next two to five years.

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