

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Iraq Experience Project

HEATHER COYNE
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviewed by: Don Tice
Initial interview date: August 24, 2004
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Heather Coyne is in her mid-30's and has a MA in International Economics from, Johns Hopkins/SAIC and has studied Arabic at the Defense Language School. Her areas of specialty are development in conflict zones, terrorism, and WMDs. She is currently employed by USIP. In Iraq she worked in areas of governance with reconstruction elements.

Lt. Coyne arrived in Baghdad in April 2002 and found the populace quite receptive to the arrival of US forces and civilian components. However, ties that were forged early on with Iraqi militia groups disintegrated over time, hindering the coalition's credibility amongst local peoples. Attempts to include these militia groups in the political process (forming local councils) were unsuccessful because of a lack of follow-up.

Lt. Coyne notes that the Oil for Food program's distribution of goods was not effectively administered. It was hampered by a lack of goals, planning, and implementation. This was compounded by a lack of Iraqi confidence in the system.

Because of the Iraqi public's dissatisfaction with Oil for Food, attempts were made to encourage interaction between the Ministry of Trade (who ran the program) and local councils. The goal of these efforts was to discuss Oil for Food issues with the public, such as food quality. Initially this was difficult, as neither the Iraqi bureaucrats, municipal councils, nor the public were familiar with engaging in a community dialogue about government programs.

US credibility was undermined in several ways. Because of the inadequate electrical supply, food could not be kept refrigerated so it spoiled. CPA was also unwilling to evict squatters from public facilities, even for persons they had leased buildings to. This inaction undermined CPA credibility as squatters were often regarded as a source of crime in communities. Ultimately, such failures led to broad hostility toward the United States.

Another major shortcoming was an over-focus on patching immediate problems rather than setting up sustainable institutions. Contracting processes, although unavoidable, were too long to win over Iraqis. CERP funds were available for quick circulation, but were the target of scams and therefore often had the effect of discrediting the American reconstruction efforts.

USAID/OTI funding was another quickly available funding source, but it could only fund indigenous Iraqi NGOs (mostly for "bricks and mortar" projects).

Unfortunately, there were few developed Iraqi NGOs who could be funded. The lack of available funding to promote NGO training and growth stifled the sector.

Lt. Coyne believes that US efforts have been largely unsuccessful in obtaining the trust of the populace – an element which she describes as critical to the success of the continuing US effort in Iraq.

The major reasons for the US failure to gain local support were (1) a lack of follow-up efforts to what were good initial efforts, including a lack of continued support for newly established institutions such as local councils and women's groups; (2) failure to translate rebuilding funds into visible, long-term institutional development; (3) failure to publicize good works performed by the coalition or the local councils; (4) failure to tie nuts-and-bolts reconstruction projects to a larger vision of progress; (5) poor targeting of funds, which were concentrated at the higher levels of government rather than at the grassroots level, and (6) distribution of political power to extremist elements with ethnic or religious power-bases.

Lt. Coyne suggests the only way to improve upon the myriad of operational shortcomings would be to create a single institution solely committed to nation-building. She notes that CPA was never united as a single organization and, as a patchwork organization, suffered numerous problems. Personnel had divided allegiances, expertise was lacking, and there was no information flow.

Lt. Coyne also offers her perspective on being an American woman in the Iraq rebuilding effort.

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Q: Today is August 24th, 2004. This is an interview with Heather Coyne being done on behalf of the U.S. Institute of Peace and Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training as part of the Iraq Experience Project. I am Donald Tice. Ms. Coyne, could you give me a brief sketch of your professional background and indicate how and when you came to be involved in what is happening in Iraq?

COYNE: I got my Masters in International Economics and International Relations from Johns Hopkins SAIC where I concentrated on development in conflict zones: strategic studies and conflict management. I went from there to the White House Office of Management and Budget where I worked for four years on terrorism issues, combating terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, that kind of thing. While I was there September 11th happened and the nation started making preparations to go to Iraq. So, as soon as I got back from Arabic school within about two months we mobilized to Iraq. While I was at the White House I joined the army reserve. I had never been in the army before, but had found out about civil affairs while I was overseeing special operations, so I joined the army on a direct mission and was basically waiting for something like this to happen. I had been in training ever since grad school to go and do this kind of mission. The timing was perfect for me.

Q: You were in Iraq for what periods?

COYNE: For 15 months starting in April of '02 (I just left in July of '03). We were in Baghdad most of the time. I spent about two or three weeks in Umm Qasr. I got there in April before the end of the combat operations was announced. I spent about two or three months working directly with my unit, standing up the food distribution program. After that was assigned to Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to the Baghdad regional office where I was a civil society officer for Baghdad. I was still part of my military unit, and I was still in uniform, but my boss was Andy Morrison who was the head of civil administration for Baghdad. I was in a civilian office that was staffed by [military and civilians].

Q: What did you expect to find and what did you find that you didn't expect?

COYNE: The expectations were pretty reasonable. We had expected to go in and be greeted by the population as liberators. I think there's a lot of hindsight now saying things have gone so badly that people don't believe that we actually were greeted that way. But, when we first went in everybody was just overjoyed to see us. People would run up to us on the streets and hug and kiss us and show us the scars that they'd had from torture in Saddam's prisons. Everybody was incredibly energetic and motivated about creating a new Iraq. That enthusiasm tapered off of course when we continued to fail to deliver results in the following months. Frustration gradually increased, but the Iraqis certainly gave us a fair amount of time to do something right before they started getting frustrated.

Q: What specifically did you start doing when you got into your position?

COYNE: As an Arabic speaker [I was] going out with our teams on a regular basis, because that gave you an extra edge in being able to talk to the population. Our focus was mostly on the Ministry of Trade distribution system, the public distribution system that gave every Iraqi a monthly ration of food. We were looking at any aspect that the military could help with to get the food program back on its feet. A lot of that was focused on the food warehouses; making sure that they had the equipment and resources they needed to protect the food and get it distributed through the system.

Of course during the conflict all the guards had fled. The fundamentalist militia had put their own guards on the food warehouses to prevent them from being looted. They had done a great job, but they weren't so eager to turn over control again to the Ministry of Trade once it got stood up. So we were going to each of the militia leaders and encouraging them to turn the food warehouses back to the Ministry of Trade's guard. That was fascinating since a lot of the militias were run by either local sheiks or the "Housa", the religious institutions there.

Q: After the initial period, what kind of relationship did you have with the militias and the other organizations?

COYNE: Following our usual pattern, we didn't do any follow up. We had a good relationship with the militias and worked with them to get compromises. For example, the Ministry of Trade would hire some of their forces as permanent security guards. A lot of the militia leaders were also interested in getting involved in other aspects of local governance, so we explained to them the new system of local council to encourage them to start participating. But no one followed up. Once they were out of the warehouses, we didn't have any regular contact with them. We handed it off to other people who weren't as engaged with them and didn't have a relationship. So, again, it just fell off the charts. We never did know whether those people took our advice and got involved with the local council.

Q: I take it you once [others] got in charge there, you backed off and left it to them more or less, or did you maintain a role in that?

COYNE: In terms of making sure the warehouses were guarded? Yes. We transferred control from the militias to the Ministry of Trade, which it stood up its own guard force. The warehouses all came back into the fold, under the control of the Ministry of Trade. The militias went on to do other things. Unfortunately there weren't so many things that were nearly as constructive as that one.

When we first got there I remember my boss had gone in to talk to some of the warehouse administrators. I was just hanging out with the guards -- the militia guards who were in front -- and I got into a conversation with them in my very poor Arabic. I noticed that they had badges with their names, pictures, and a little picture of the mosque in Najaf. They were so proud that they were there guarding the warehouses from looters. I thought any organization that can issue badges in the middle of a war is an organization that we needed to look into. I sent it up the chain and I don't know if anybody ever looked at it.

The guards were already giving us names [of important people]: Ali Sustani and Muqtada al-Sadr and the rest of them. They told us, "We work for the housa and the housa is very active in trying to stand up community programs." But I don't know if anyone ever followed up on it.

Q: Did you have a good relationship with the Ministry of Trade itself?

COYNE: Yes. We were working through CPA, so the CPA senior advisors were the direct interlocutors with the Ministry of Trade. But our role, we had an interesting aspect of this mission because it was the soldiers who were in the streets talking to the people on a regular basis. They found out very quickly that the public was very dissatisfied with the food distribution program and with the accountability of the Ministry of Trade.

We also were connected to the people working with the local council. We thought that [involving the council] was the best way to improve the customer service aspect of the Ministry of Trade. It was the best way to make sure the ministry understood that they were a customer service organization and needed to be responsive to citizens' concerns. We encouraged the local council to invite ministry of trade officials and ask the kinds of questions citizens were interested in. Why is the [food] quality bad? Why don't we have more variety in the food? That kind of thing. That was the first time the Baghdad city council had ever brought a ministry official to the council and hounded them with questions about what they were doing.

It was an Iraqi ministry of trade official, not an American. They came and made a presentation and faced up to the people that they were serving. This was a brand new thing for them, because even though they policed themselves internally as a ministry, they don't think of themselves as responsive or responsible to the citizens themselves.

Q: So, it was a ministry that ran it, but it didn't do what the people needed?

COYNE: Right, it did its own thing. It was fun to see the ministry realizing that things were new, [that there was] a new sheriff in town and they needed to be responsive to the citizens. Also, we were impressed to see the city council jumped right on that and they weren't shy. They demanded answers from the ministry. Then we were hoping that the council would then feed that information back to the citizens so the citizens would have a direct connection to their government. Over time the councils got in the habit of asking the ministry officials or other local officials to show up and be held accountable for what they were doing.

Q: Did they come to people like you for guidance or suggestions or demands or anything like that?

COYNE: Yes and that's how I got involved with CPA, because once I spent that effort trying to get the ministry officials to go to the councils I found out about this group at CPA that was working directly with the city councils in getting them stood up and helping them write their charter in their handbook and all that kind of stuff. They had a position open on their team and asked me to come over and fill it. After scrambling with my unit -- which is never glad to see people leaving -- I was given the position of civil society officer, which was the "sibling team" to the council team.

Q: Civil society officer?

COYNE: Yes. CPA Baghdad region civil society team and of course the team consisted of [just] me for most of the time I was there. The government team had more people because they were working with the local council, from the neighborhood level to the district, city, and provincial level. They had multiple councils that they were advisors to and [they were] helping the councils understand what their role was.

Q: So, there were people that worked with the councils on a daily basis?

COYNE: Yes, that was the whole role of our office, but also the councils were working with the military officer who was in their [respective] districts. Both civil affairs and the maneuver commanders were responsible for standing up the councils and mentoring them through those first months.

Q: Were you acting in a military capacity or were you in a uniform?

COYNE: I was in uniform and I was considered military and I was just staffing a position on a detail assignment to CPA. CPA Baghdad -- when it realized that it wasn't getting enough civilians coming in from the States to fill all the positions -- assigned a lot of civil affairs officers and other military to fill the positions.

Q: How long did you stay in that kind of position? For most of the time that you were there?

COYNE: Yes, ever since September of whatever it was '02 until July of '03 I was the civil society officer based in Baghdad at the palace.

Q: Did you go out on extensive excursion outs?

COYNE: We went out almost everyday, and sometimes two or three times a day on different missions. [That was] until the spring when things started getting dangerous and then resources for escorts rapidly dried out and [CPA] tried to keep down the number of visits you had to do outside the green zone. Until then we were out everyday.

Q: Was there a point where, in terms of a relationship between the Americans and the Iraqis, when you noticed a crumbling of the respect and of the inner-workings?

COYNE: Yes. It's interesting; it depended on whom you were working with even though it was gradually deteriorating from the beginning. I think the first realization came when we couldn't get the electricity on throughout the summer and people were not only miserable because it was hot, but food was spoiling. You could only buy a certain amount of food because they couldn't count on their refrigerators working. It created such destruction in their lives. When they realized it wasn't going to get fixed, we lost a lot of support at that point.

Over the year and a half that I was there I never had difficult interactions with the Iraqis that I was working with [in] the civil society organizations, because from the beginning they were very enthusiastic. They remained motivated and driven throughout the whole period, even though they did get more and more frustrated with what results we could provide them [and] what access we could provide them to resources.

The real way that you could tell the frustration was growing was when you drove around the city [and saw] how people would respond to the Humvees. At the very beginning people would rush out of their houses to come and wave as we drove by. After a while they would wave a little tentatively. After that, they would watch the Humvees with suspicion or concern, but they still waved back when I waved to them. Right towards the end nobody was waving.

Q: Would you guess that that's still the situation now?

COYNE: Yes. I've been gone for two months so things could have changed radically, but there wasn't anything that happened since I left that would have increased their trust and interest in what's happening there.

Q: What areas do you think you had some real success in and what kind of things did you do to gain that?

COYNE: The most important thing to keep in mind is that there were a lot of little successes, but we were never able to follow them up and really take them to the next level.

For instance the local councils were a good start. They got people together. They started learning how to be a council, how to represent their constituents. They really started pulling themselves together as real organizations, but we never gave them any funding until the very end, so they didn't have any way to legitimize themselves with the population. We didn't give them the staffing or any of the resources that they could have used to take themselves to the next level.

Myself personally I had a couple successes. One of them was the women's centers. The goal was to establish nine women's centers in Baghdad where women could get educational and vocational training, human rights awareness, and help them get launched in terms of organizing themselves for participation in the political process. Still like I said we weren't able to follow up on it; we couldn't get all the centers open in the time I was there (for really stupid reasons).

The reason that [the women's centers] were a success was the implementing partner that we gave the grant to, Women for Women International, was well experienced and had great relationships with the local population and worked with them directly. We stayed out of it as much as possible except for troubleshooting and support where we could give it. They did a fantastic job and the Iraqi staffs of the centers are 100% behind it and really involved in making them a success. But again, the only places where the centers failed to measure up were the places where CPA was responsible: getting the building, getting the facilities for them.

Q: CPA wasn't getting that done?

COYNE: CPA could not, and this was one of the major failures across the city: the squatter problem. The military very early on said it was not going to be involved in evictions because it didn't want to be seen escorting families out of their houses. There was no capability in CPA or the Iraqi government or the military to move squatters out of houses. Squatters were everywhere in every single building in Baghdad. They had moved

in.

Q: Because they had been forced out?

COYNE: We don't know. A lot of them were just economic opportunists who were renting their own houses somewhere else and moved into a public building.

Q: I like that term.

COYNE: Some of them were truly desperate people who had moved for whatever reason from other parts of the city or from other parts of Iraq and some of them were probably people who were just living in such poverty that they said, "Hey, this is a great chance to improve our situation. Let's move out of the ghetto and into this nice old house that was occupied by the Baath party."

The problem was that, with all the public buildings occupied by squatters, you didn't have any way to provide services to the community. [This was] whether it was getting ministries back up and running, local councils giving the local councils homes and offices (a place to operate out of), or to house NGOs who were going to do community service. You didn't have any place to put any of these people if you couldn't move the squatters out.

A lot of the squatters were armed and dangerous. The community saw the squatters as being the source of crime in the community. When CPA and the military abdicated our responsibility to move squatters out, what the community saw was, number one, this was undermining rule of law because they knew that this was a source of crime and we couldn't do anything about it. We were refusing to do anything about it. That undermined the credibility that the military and CPA had.

Second, there was a process for citizens to apply for authorization to use public property, NGOs and local council for the rest. When they went towards that process CPA would give them authorization for the building. They would go to the building, find the squatters, come back to us and say, "Well, there are squatters in my building. I need help." CPA would say, "No. You have to move them yourself. We don't have anything to do with that." You undermine your own laws, which was the procedural way of getting authorization. Even if they went through the process and did everything correctly, they still couldn't get anything out of it.

Third you were denying your ability to provide services to the community because you didn't have any place to house this service. It was just the most, one of the most ridiculous things that we let happen and we could never get past it.

Q: You mentioned that there are a lot of little successes, but there were failures because of

stupid reasons. Could you go into a little bit of that?

COYNE: Right. I can and remind me that on the success side to come back once more to the Hidea club because that was one.

The failures. Okay. I can group the failures into three major categories that were important from my perspective as the civil society officer. There were lots of other big problems: the army and the looting and all those things that I'm sure you heard about ad infinitum. Since my perspective is civil society, let me talk from that.

The first major problem was our contracting processes. We were not buying the things that we wanted to buy. We were buying, say [to] fix the infrastructure. That wasn't our goal. We weren't there to fix the infrastructure. We were there to fix the infrastructure in a way that was sustainable and had ownership and buy in by the Iraqis. That's a different thing than fixing the [physical] infrastructure. So, when you write your contract as we did -- which was getting on the ground, realizing that things were broken, things were wrong, we needed such and such a service or a product -- we'd write the contract or bid the contract or ask people to help do just that. We weren't building them in a way that would make them sustainable and bring in Iraqi buy-ins.

If you wanted to fix the electric sector you needed to write a contract that had the results you wanted to see, like it's going to transfer management to Iraqis in this time period. That means you are going to have, as part of your responsibility, an Iraqi management-training program to bring up local leaders to run the operations [in] the way that will make them effective. You'll want to establish vocational schools to train the local labor and the skills you'd need them to have. You'd want perhaps to employ a certain number of demobilized soldiers so that, I mean whatever assets you wanted to build in, those needed to be in the contract. Instead we made the contracts just to solve the immediate problem which was get the lights on or build that bridge, instead of the long term results we wanted to see.

The second problem with contracting was the time that it took. There are reasons for things to take a long time. You want to competitively bid them. You want to get the best background to the contract. That meant that we'd make ourselves obsolete in the process because our time frame was so much longer than what we needed to show results to the Iraqis. We just couldn't get anything out there fast enough.

Most of the specific examples [of] that would be [a] program that USAID was building to have civil society training and resource centers around the country. These would also do independent media training. Great idea. It's a wonderful contract. The scope of work is excellent, but they were trying to get it out in January and it was just awarded last week. It is now the end of August. It won't be open for another couple months.

Q: Was that AID's problem?

COYNE: That was AID's problem, but it's not a problem. AID actually this is a pretty fast turnaround I think from AID's perspective. It's just that AID's process is a long process that has a lot of bureaucracy in it that's important in terms of protecting the American taxpayer.

Q: Was CPA helping AID or was it two different ships?

COYNE: Completely two different ships. We were trying to help them find a building and ran into a squatter problem. So, I still don't know if they even had buildings for the contractors once they get there. AID has one small group called the OTI, Office of Transition Initiatives, and their organization is supposed to correct that long process. They're supposed to get the high-impact quick-response funding that has a lot more flexibility in terms of getting funding out the door quickly.

That worked great except that it had its own limitations. It could only go to Iraqi groups and it was mostly focused on bricks and mortar, it was on reconstruction equipment, that kind of thing, as opposed to paying salaries or [going] for training and classes and things like that.

We had [a] brilliant idea when it was clear that the AID program was going to take a while to get that full curriculum, full service, NGO training and resource centers on line. We said, "Okay, let's work with OTI and get a pilot project going for Baghdad." So, at least the NGOs in Baghdad -- and most of them are based there -- could come in and get the basic skill sets, on [things like] "How do you write a proposal? How do you plan and implement a program? How do you work with international organizations to get funding for what you want to do? How do you even set up an Internet account?" [This was needed] because most of them didn't have any of the basic skills [required].

Q: Did they have the equipment?

COYNE: They didn't have anything. They were just people coming in off the streets saying, "We want to help our fellow Iraqis. We want to be an NGO. We want to distribute humanitarian aid or defend human rights or defend the environment, protect widows" and all the rest of it.

Q: What percentage of that was honestly doing that or which ones just wanted to get their hands on [some money]?

COYNE: I have no idea what the percentage is, but it was certainly a large number of people who were coming into it. Criminals; fraudulent or just looking for a handout. Most of them were I would say most were truly dedicated to wanting to take part in

rebuilding their society in that country. They just didn't know how to do it. They just didn't have the experience in organizing and carrying out programs.

We wanted to offer them the basic skills, training, equipment and resources, and computer Internet cafe all that kind of stuff. Micro-grants for training [where] you write an exercise in your training course for a budget, "Well, let's actually give them a budget of \$100 that they can go out and spend and [then] come back and have the instructor help identify how they could have improved the program, and that gets them ready for larger grants." Grants [of] even \$5,000 would have made a big difference for them to go out and actually get services started in the community.

The problem was that we didn't have an Iraqi organization that we could give money to that was capable of doing this for all the other organizations because they were all [too] new. OTI's money was locked up until we had an Iraqi organization that we could give it to. OTI couldn't pay an international organization to come in and do that training. We said, "Well, that's okay because they have an Iraqi organization -- sort of an association of the Iraqi NGO, something that could represent the wider community -- we can get the money to them and they can hire international NGOs to come in and do whatever training they wanted."

It's not that they have to see the trainers; they just have to put the Iraqi face and ownership on this new training center. We didn't have anyone to help build an Iraqi NGO association. The military couldn't do it and OTI couldn't say "You must create an association so we can give you money." CPA didn't have the resources. It was just me. We ended up scrambling for months trying to get the basis of an Iraqi association together that we could use to organize this training program around.

Pretty much right towards the end there's another long, sad story about the group that we finally got the money from -- the British Foreign Office -- to bring in an NGO from Britain to help us along with this and help get the NGOs organized. The British Foreign Office lost the money for months. They just lost it. It was just sitting somewhere and nobody could find it. That was delayed for months. I mean stupid, stupid things.

Q: That doesn't sound like our government, but it does sound stupid.

COYNE: I know, so in any case one thing after another meant that by the time I left -- which was late June, July -- we really still didn't have anything to offer the Iraqi NGOs. We were still waiting for the USA, the training program and we basically had to give up since the AID training program was supposedly just around the corner. We said, "There's no point in us trying to stand something up at this late date when the comprehensive program is coming along."

Q: Now, the comprehensive program that was coming. Was that what you were going

back to be involved in?

COYNE: No, I'm not, but USAID just awarded the contract and they'll stand up five or six training centers around the country. That's a separate USAID contract. The USAID will certainly be able to take advantage of the fact that there are more Iraqi organizations that will be getting trained so that we can work with them and give grants to them. It will be a cooperative arrangement, but it's not a formal one.

Okay, so that was contracting. One more point on the money aspect, getting money out to the people who could do the most with it and that is the CERP Program.

Q: CERP?

COYNE: Commanders Emergency Response Program. This is being held up as the silver bullet, the answer to all our problems with getting money out on the streets quickly because the commanders get a pot of money that they can spend on local projects, reconstruction projects, even things like women's centers or democracy buildings. They have a lot of leeway on what they spend the money on and they can get it out fast. Days or weeks, they can get money out to a project.

Back in D.C. everybody is looking at this as the way to go. Give all the money to the commanders and they can get the money out to the projects right away. The problem is that soldiers have no experience in programming, budgeting, contracting, or development. Yes, they can get the money out fast, but the money is going to [do] the wrong thing. It's either going to the wrong people -- contractors who are cheating or charging you \$20,000 for something that's \$2,000 -- and/or you end up getting very poor quality work.

The community sees this. They know that they're being cheated. They know how much the soldiers are putting into these projects, they see the poor quality coming out, and basically [we] were reinforcing the idea that this was business as usual. A few people will be enriched by the contracts coming from the government and the citizens will see poor results. They know that they're getting screwed by this. That's one aspect of it that's alienating the community.

The other is that the soldiers aren't trained in development. They don't have any expertise in sustainable development; [so] they're choosing the wrong projects. They're throwing money at things that look good. Some soldier will have a bright idea and will say, "Hey, that would be a good thing for the community."

Sometimes it works. Sometimes you get a good payoff, but most of the time you're putting money into things that aren't really the right things, nor are you able to create coherent vision. None of these [CERP] projects hold together in any way, except [as] just throwing money at different pieces.

Q: What about at the division level in the army? Were there people out working with the GIs? I mean were there people with enough experience and background?

COYNE: Who has experience in the army about developing schools? It's not what we're paid for. Yet, and everybody claims that civil affairs can do that. Civil affairs has only incrementally [more] training in this than any other reserve unit.

So, civil affairs soldiers, if they're lucky enough to be in a position that uses their civilian skills, maybe they can have a good impact. Most of the time civil affairs soldiers -- because of the way that the organization works -- are not in positions where they have any experience whatsoever. People are put in positions because of personnel reasons.

We had a captain who had one of the only degrees in the country on standing up emergency medical systems, fire and medical. He would have been the perfect choice to lead the effort on standing up the fire system and ambulance response. He was assigned to currency exchange. The person who was leading the fire department was a civil rights lawyer. The position he should have been in doing [in] civil rights law was filled by an engineer. I mean what's the advantage of having all these civilian skills if you apply them wrong?

But even beyond that, civil affairs again claims that it has all this great experience that it can apply to the reconstruction. But [can] you bring a cop in, a soldier who's a cop in civilian life and put him in charge of standing up a police department? Those aren't the skills he has. So, even if he's in the right field, you don't take a patrol person off the street and assume that he can create a police department. It's not the same skills set.

Civil affairs and the rest of the military just don't have the experience to do development and to do local governance. They've done a great effort and it's really amazing how well the soldiers standing up the local councils could do without any training and without any experience. It says something that how well steeped Americans are in democracy that you can take a soldier, who is not really in a democratic infusion, and put them in charge of standing up a local council and they can do it.

They didn't necessarily do it as well as they could if they'd had the right background, but they did do a pretty good job and that's impressive, but that's not what we were there for. We weren't there to just muddle through. We were there to do an excellent job and to create an alternative model: a successive model for the Middle East. We failed in doing that because we just did not have the right capabilities, and we didn't bring the capabilities we did have to bear on the problems.

All right, that was contracting; the second piece that I was really upset about was the public diplomacy campaign (or lack thereof). This was partly an organization problem

with CPA.

The CPA didn't have a good enough grasp -- the center didn't have a good enough grasp on what all the different programs were doing -- that it knew about the good news stories and could pull them in. But even when it knew about the good news stories, it didn't have [a] structure of scenes and concepts; [the] ways to articulate the vision, mobilize the population in support of that vision, and then empower them to participate in supporting the mission.

You can announce a bullet list of things that had been done, "These schools fell, this bridge fell," that kind of thing. But that didn't get the population excited about it in a way that they knew there was progress being made.

Even more importantly than the center not being able to articulate this vision was that [in] each of the program areas -- which were actually executed programs -- everybody was stressed to the limit and nobody had [the] time, energy, or expertise to build-in a public information aspect to their programs.

My favorite example is at one point the local councils were working with the local commander and they actually got together a clean up program for their district. They were hiring people at \$10 a day to clean up the streets and the streets were looking better. Everybody was happy.

Everybody was patting themselves on the back for this when the commanders found out that the workers who were engaged in the program had no idea they were working for the local council. They thought the Sadr bureau was paying them. They thought this because the Sadr bureau went to them and told them that Muqtada al-Sadr had identified the streets as being a problem, [and he] wanted to provide employment and [so] he was paying these people. Sadr was getting all the credit for the operation.

Q: He was getting all the credit. He's still getting the problems.

COYNE: So, I went to the local commander and said, "Why not, when you hand out a \$10 bill, also hand out a certificate of appreciation that says 'Thank you for participating in rebuilding your country. Together we will make an Iraq we can all be proud of.' Signed, 'Your friendly neighborhood local council. P.S.- The neighborhood council meets on Thursdays at 3:00 PM. Citizens are encouraged to participate and attend and voice their concerns to their council member.'"

The commander looked at me and said, "That would be a good idea, but we don't have any capability to print certificates." Not recognizing that not only do we have the psi-ops brigade that can print anything we want them to print, but we also have local Iraqi printing capacity. Why not set up a quick contract with the local Iraqi organization to

print these certificates, [so you can] hand them out by the thousands anytime you do anything? That should have been part of the program.

When you have a program that's in anyway tied to the local council, you need to make sure you advertise the local council, sell the local council, explain to people [it] was the local council is as part of [their] program. That's what we were missing because we had no public information campaign, [no] public diplomacy campaign. Nobody was speaking about that aspect of it. It was just "Let's get the street clean. Let's clean up that park. Let's rebuild that school." There was no way of mobilizing people around the projects.

Q: They couldn't see any connection between the two?

COYNE: Right. That's what ultimately is going to lead to the failures that yes, you might see a street cleanup or you might see a new school in your district, but unless you can tie that to a larger vision of progress in Iraq, people aren't going to buy into this operation. So, public diplomacy campaign, absolutely missing, absolutely critical, probably the most important thing we should have been doing in Iraq and we didn't do it at all. We were mostly aiming, selling our stories to Fox News. That's bitterness coming through, but we could see a lot more effort on reaching out to Fox News and the American news organizations than either to the Iraqi people or to the Arab world and those were the groups that we needed to sell them to.

The last piece -- and we've talked about a lot of this already -- is the public diplomacy of buying the wrong things with our money. The last piece is that we were empowering the wrong people. We've talked about this already in terms of building local councils and talking about decentralizing decisions down to the local government and instead we gave all the money to ministries and none to local councils. There was no way to decentralize it. Even though we gave lip service to decentralization and empowering these local organizations and the local civil society organizations, all these things to move the country past a dictatorship, we ended up doing the same kinds of things that you do in a dictatorship; empower the capital and centralize all the funding and decision making authority at the top.

This is a little past my expertise level, so I probably shouldn't speculate, but the way that we chose governing council members and also empowered who we put in charge of the ministry [illustrates this]. Even though we talked about the need to emphasize cross cutting divisions that weren't just secular, ethnic divisions to find other things that Iraqis could work [on], focus [on], and orient themselves around. Still the people that we chose -- and the people that we empowered -- were leaders of ethnic or religious extremists. Their only identity was an ethnic or religious group. Instead of finding the moderates who didn't identify themselves that way, who identified themselves around issue areas (functional areas like federalism or Iraq is a great nation or whatever it is), we chose the people whose power base was ethnic and religious. We made them, we put them in

charge. Now we've divided up the ministries that this ministry goes to SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and that ministry goes to the Dawa party and all the rest of it.

Q: So, they're all working against each other?

COYNE: Right. They think of their ministry as a sea stone. That's their power base from which they attack each other and increase their own power, as opposed to choosing people who would be working together ([whose] incentive would be cooperation as opposed to dividing up).

It's just; it's really quite heartbreaking because we had everything going for us. We had all the ingredients. The Iraqis were ready; they were excited about doing it. Yes, there were spoilers. There were some groups from the very beginning who didn't buy into this and wanted to create their own model, but those were fringe elements for the most part. The bulk of the Iraqi population wanted to get back to normalcy, wanted to get back to work, wanted to create a new society, and somehow we managed to alienate them and empower the fringe elements because we didn't deliver any results. We couldn't show them that things were changing, we couldn't give them a place to participate and to buy into the [system].

Q: What are your expectations on what the situation will be when you go back next week? Are you aware of changes that will make it more possible to really get to the people and get them as part of the action?

COYNE: Clearly I think there's hope because I'm going back for another year. Even though we squandered a window of opportunity (that we can't get back), I think it's still salvageable if we do everything right from now on. But I don't see any additional capability to do things right based on that we haven't done right yet, and we've lost a lot of our capacity because we've worn out some of the original resources. I'm not sure we have anything going for us to do it better than we did before.

The change is that, luckily, CPA and the American effort is no longer the center of gravity. In the first year what we did was the most important thing that was happening. What we do now, as the embassy and as the military, is not the most important thing that is happening. It's the transfer [that] has gone to the Iraqi people and the Iraqi government and the Iraqi leaders. It's really up to them at this point. We can empower them more or less. We can support them more or less, but everything does not depend on what we do the way it did the first year. That's why I'm very excited to be going back.

Q: It's a different kind of thing now.

COYNE: It's really up to them and we're in the supporting role, as opposed to us in the

leadership role with them supporting. Of course it's better that way. We probably shouldn't have done it the way we did it in the first place. We should have set it up so that we were always in a supporting role, but we were the occupation.

Q: You didn't know what the needs were going to be when you dropped on the ground?

COYNE: We could have known and a lot of people did know. The problem was -- and this is my basic background to everything that I've said -- you are always going to do this badly until you create an organization that is dedicated to this mission. Until it is trained, staffed, resourced, and equipped to do this mission, so that they can prepare in advance, they can train people in advance, they can develop doctrine and a body of knowledge in advance, they can develop the materials, contracts, and even down to the signs in Arabic that say, "Checkpoint. Slow Down." I can't tell you how long we had signs in English saying slow down. The Iraqis didn't slow down, go figure.

Until you have an organization that trains to do this mission, we will keep doing it badly. There's no way around that. You can't pull together people and materials to support a mission of this scale -- or even any humanitarian intervention -- because you'll be missing the organizational culture, the procedures, the relationships, all of these things that need to be dealt in advance so that people know who they're working with and how they're going to be working with them.

Until you have that, we will keep going in and starting from scratch because no one will have the time to pull the definitive [book] off the shelf on how to set up a local council. You're just going to do whatever seems right to you at the time. You're going to be resource scarce. You're going to not have the technology you need to support you, like databases.

None of that was even in existence when we got there. Everybody was building it from scratch. Our NGO law -- that NGO order that laid out rules on NGOs and how NGOs should register -- we put that together in two or three days in Baghdad once Bremer realized that we needed an NGO law because a lot of terrorist fronting NGOs were coming into the country. Two or three days does not give you the time you need to even bring in the right people who have expertise in this, much less put it through a process that the Iraqis can review and comment on and build themselves so that they can buy into it. It just means that we ended up with something that looks like a Stalinist law when our whole purpose was to be there to encourage civil society throughout. We're going to keep falling over ourselves.

[END SIDE]

Q: What effect if any did the arrival of Jerry Bremer on the scene have?

COYNE: I was pretty peripheral to all that because at that point I was still with my unit, [and] the civil affairs unit didn't get a lot of sense of what was going on at the top. [But] the sense was that he was coming in, it was a start over. Repair the mistakes that we'd made at the beginning and get things on track.

However, at that point civil affairs didn't really know it was off track. We hadn't heard what Jay Garner had been doing and it seemed like it was going okay. We weren't aware of all the internal problems that they were having in [the] organization. We wouldn't have known, I still don't know exactly what they were upset about with Garner.

When Bremer came in and said, "Now, we're really off and running. This is going to be a professional organization." It never changed. It wasn't, I mean Garner may have done some things wrong, but Bremer wasn't going to have anymore success than Garner was until he had an organization that acted like a real organization. CPA was never an organization. A lot of people called it tribal. You had State Department, DOD and USAID. All of these groups came and stayed in their tribes and never coalesced as an organization.

Q: Did Bremer's arrival have any affect on how things were organized and how the duties were spread out?

COYNE: I don't know because I didn't get into CPA until August or September, so we didn't see any immediate changes, but I certainly know that once I did get into CPA there still was no organization. There was no information flow. You couldn't even get copies made; I mean for goodness sake! The CPA copy center was supposed to provide copy support to the rest of the organizations. You had a limit of 100 pages per day, which meant that if you had a ten-page document you could get ten copies.

We were going out and taking ten, 20 page documents describing the election process, describing the new government, to 400 Iraqi NGOs who wanted that information and wanted to take it out to the community and explain what it was that CPA was doing. We got ten copies a day. You couldn't operate. What that meant was, you couldn't tell the Iraqi NGOs what was going on because you'd take ten copies and they'd fight over trying to get the copy and nobody knew what was going on.

For the Iraqis looking at CPA (and looking at ORHA under Garner) it [all] just was "the American". They didn't make any distinction between what was going on there. It was a change of acronyms. Both acronyms were hard for the Iraqis to understand anyway. Interestingly enough, Iraqis don't use acronyms at all. Any time they say the UN they say the United Nations every time. So, all these acronyms we were using meant very little to Iraqis and it was just another reason behind the in-transparency, the total lack of understanding and communication between the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqis. We used acronyms and Washington buzzwords, and all the rest of it that made sense to us, and those just don't translate.

Q: Did you have any sense of the differences in the way the Kurds handled things? One gets the impression that the Hussein regime pretty much left them to do their own thing because they were such a pain in the neck. Did you see any evidence of their getting involved in the things that you were doing?

COYNE: We were Baghdad focused. That was my region so I had very little sense of what was going on in the rest of the country. However, there are a lot of Kurds in Baghdad and they think of themselves as Iraqis. They don't think of themselves, yes, they're Kurds, that's part of their identity, but they didn't think of themselves as a separate nation. They didn't have much allegiance, if any, or understanding of what was going on in the Kurdish provinces in the North. They were Baghdadis and they were dealing with their problems as Kurds in Baghdad, not as a separate organization.

Q: Did you have any problems, I don't mean this to sound sexist, but you were a woman in basically a man's world in a society where women are pretty well off to the side. Did you have any problems operating as a representative?

COYNE: I had more problems with the American military than I did with any Iraqi. I'm serious. I never had a problem with the Iraqis because the Iraqis saw me in a role. I was in a position. I was an American. I was an American soldier. I was an American soldier who was doing programs for NGOs and might have resources for them. They worked with me in that tone. It was never, we don't want to work with you or talk to you as a woman. It was only when we got to personal questions on a friendly basis that they'd ask, "Oh, you're a woman in the military. That's really interesting." They're mostly just fascinated by it. No one ever was reluctant to work with me because I'm a woman.

In fact, at one point I went out to deal with one of these sheiks, the fundamentalist sheiks whose militia was running the food warehouse. The American major who was working with them told me, "Okay, when we go to negotiate with them, you need to stay in the back because you're a woman and it would offend them to have to talk to you. Just keep yourself quiet in the back." I said, "Well, that's okay, but I haven't had any trouble so far." You know, I was a lieutenant and he was a major so I stayed in the back.

When we introduced myself I spoke a little Arabic and did the standard greetings in Arabic and introduced myself using my Arabic name, which is Huda, which is a very religiously loaded name. I was lucky to be assigned that name when I was back at DLI (Defense Language Institute). It has a lot of religious connotations. So, the sheik sort of noted me both for the Arabic and the name and greeted me without shaking hands of course. Then we all got into the negotiations and the major was making promises and referrals to this and that, and really not getting to the meat. The sheik was clearly getting very impatient with this because he wanted to see real change and real commitment by us if he was going to give something back.

About halfway through the negotiations he sort of moved back away and let his minions continue talking to the major and he pointed to me across the crowd and beckoned me to come over and talk to him. We sort of stepped off to the side and in my broken Arabic started talking about what really needed to be done for this food warehouse, what his real concern was, why he was worried about handing it over, and we worked through a lot of the issues until the major finally realized that he was no longer talking to the sheik, he was just talking to some of his servants and looked over and was very disgruntled to find that the sheik and I were deep in conversation and had really worked out a lot of the problems already.

After that I never had anyone tell me again that I shouldn't be talking directly to [someone]. Clearly the Arabic gave me such an advantage over anybody else in terms of credibility and willingness to communicate that that outweighed anything else. If you're a woman, maybe they recognize it, but it doesn't weigh in on their willingness to talk.

The other funny anecdote I have is that at one point I had snuck into a meeting of lots of generals and all the military commanders were sitting around a table and they were talking about the local council and the issue of more women.

Q: These were Americans?

COYNE: American soldiers. The issue of women on councils came up and the commanding general was pounding the table, "We absolutely need more women in these councils. The Iraqi women have to have a voice. We've got to increase the number of women. Everything must be done to increase the number of women on the councils." Around the table, nods of agreement, shaking heads, absolutely this is incredibly important. I looked around the room of 40 people in the room I was the only female and I wasn't really supposed to be there in the first place. It just was so ironic. This is again, the problem. How does a military, which has a different culture? I'm not saying it doesn't support women, but it has a very different culture than what the civilians need in order to.

Q: Basically they didn't know what they were talking about in that little tirade there.

COYNE: As a model, they're going around telling the Iraqis you need to elect more women and the Iraqis look at them and see only men. What are you talking about? So, no, I did not have any trouble. It was actually a fun thing because you could see how your personality and your skills could outweigh any bias that somebody might have.

The Iraqis were in a lot of ways much more open to women leadership than any of the rest of the countries in the Middle East. When our NGOs elected a spokesman there was one woman candidate out of the 17 and they elected her because she made the best

speech. It wasn't even a question to them that they wouldn't elect the person with the best speech regardless if she was female or not.

As I was leaving the staff at U.S. Institute of Peace, the Baghdad staff, one of them came up to me and knew I was a candidate for the position and said, "You know in Iraq we don't usually have women bosses. Women aren't the leaders and it is difficult for men to work for a woman, but we want to work for you." I said, "I think there's a compliment in there, I'm not quite sure."

Q: Were there any particular areas, which you saw that really did do a good job? One of the reasons I raise this is one of the people that I've interviewed was a man from Michigan who had been the public health chief for the state of Michigan and he said because the doctors there had been sort of disenfranchised. Their whole infrastructure was gone and he said that he was able to get to the doctors who were if you could give them help and give them medicines and operating rooms and that kind of thing they could really build back up. He said that over the years he was there they were able to make a great progress in the general medical care area. Is that something that rings a bell with you or that you're aware of?

COYNE: I wasn't privy to what was going on in the hospital so it may be that they made incredible improvements. It's hard because I look at every area that I was involved in and we were failing miserably, but I can believe that in a specific area you could make a big jump because we saw big jumps here and there. One, we didn't tie them together and two, I don't know how well we sustained them.

So, you saw the zoo for instance, this crazy example. The zoo went from these horrible, horrible miserable cages and animals dying for lack of good health [or] care, and South African game parks sent people who volunteered to help renovate the zoo. NGOs from all over the world participated. They stood up the zoo. They started improving the cages and providing real habitats for the animals. They created a humane society. The first humane society for Iraq so that they would educate kids on how to treat animals. It had a place where people could bring their animals for vaccinations. They were starting a donkey care clinic because really if you learn how to take care of your donkey you're going to get more work out of it. It's an economic impetus to treating animals well. They had everything going.

Q: That's a marvelous story. Why hasn't it ever been shared?

COYNE: Yes. As I was leaving, the zoo didn't have a budget. The NGOs were finally starting to head out and go back home. I don't know if the local staff had been trained to a point where they could sustain any of this. Because they didn't have a budget in the city, they were still; they were back to the point of begging for food for the animals from the international community because there wasn't a way to feed the animals.

I mean unless you build it in a way that it can take care of itself after you leave. So, in hospitals, a lot of stories we heard is once you equipped places, if you didn't keep the security on it or encourage the staff to take responsibility for the equipment, it would just be looted later. I don't know what happened in the hospital case, but I'm concerned that across the board we showed real incompetence in being able to set these things up in a way [that] they would take care of themselves.

Q: Do you have a sort of a summation on what you found there and what you think can happen and what you see as the future?

COYNE: Overall I believed in the vision when we started out. It was the right vision. To create a successful alternative model for the Middle East that Arabs could channel their energy into something productive as opposed to having it channeled into anger against the U.S. This was the right thing to do. I've been waiting to go to Iraq for 15 or 16 years, since 1988 when Saddam used chemical weapons against the Kurds. I thought we needed to go in then. I thought we could have gone in at any point since and it would still have been the right thing.

So, when we went in, to me it was better late than never. I didn't care about a lot of the reasons that were being espoused as the reason for the war. I thought this was the right thing to do. I still think it was the right thing to do, but we did it so badly that it's now backfired and we've created resentment and anger and a battleground and harbor for terrorists that wasn't there before.

The reason we did it badly and the reason it backfired is that we did not have the capability to do it well. We didn't have an organization that was trained, resourced, equipped, staffed, dedicated, [and] accountable for doing this well. We tried to piece together expertise across the community without anybody who was the clear leader and had a way to pull it together in a way that did the job correctly.

We have a lot of experience doing this. The last few decades we've done very little but this, but we haven't learned from those lessons because lessons aren't learned. Lessons learned, we'll write them down and no one will ever read them. They must be taught and we have not set up a way to teach them to develop the lessons into a body of knowledge that will then allow people to develop contracts, materials, and resources in advance of these operations. They must be done in advance because once you get there you don't have the time, the resources, [or] the freedom to think big in terms of how to do it right. You've got to have thought about it and build a relationship and plan it ahead of time.

I don't think the public and the American bureaucracy has yet totally bought into the fact that we will be doing this on a regular basis; failed states, broke states, humanitarian interventions in situations of conflict are going to be a staple of our existence if we want

to be sure that we're doing the right thing, not only for peoples who are oppressed around the world but also from our own national security perspective.

When people are oppressed and miserable and have no hope for the future and no ability to improve the lives of their families, they're going to take it out on us and they can now – in this century -- bring it to our doorstep. We have to be able to intervene before that happens and create these alternative models so that people can funnel their energy into something productive instead of being angry with us. If we're going to do it on a regular basis, we've got to learn to do it better because we cannot afford to do it as badly as we did it in Iraq.

We wasted an incredible opportunity in that first year, the goodwill of a nation and the credibility of our nation. We squandered that and it's not because it was too hard to do. We never got to the hard stuff. We tripped ourselves up on the easy stuff. I'm not saying that it's going to be easy even once we get a good capability to do this, but it is worth doing well.

I have all sorts of visions and pipe dreams. They say that a vision without a budget is a hallucination on how you could do it well, how you could build a capability and an organization that was no so threatening to the bureaucracy that it would be undermined at the very beginning, but they could draw on the resources we have in the government and private sector and apply them in a coherent fashion to these kinds of reconstruction operations. You can't duplicate, you can't recreate the expertise we have, let's just use it wisely and use it in a way that we get the results that we want to see.

There's still a chance in Iraq, but I think like I said the responsibility has shifted away from the American effort to the Iraqi effort. It's up to them how they want to make this succeed. We can still interfere with them, and make it harder for them, or we can support them in ways that are wiser, more or less wise, but it's really their ball game now.

Q: Do you think we can provide the kind of help that will lift them [out of] this particular state they're in now?

COYNE: I know that USIP has a program that will do that well because it's about empowering Iraqi organizations to take responsibility for themselves in a way that they really can sustain an effort. I don't yet see that we've shifted the way we do business in terms of the military CERP funds or in terms of the way the embassy relates to the Iraqis. I don't see a shift in a way that would support them more wisely than we've done in the past.

We're going to end up throwing money at the wrong things without using the expertise we have. We have the expertise and we aren't going to pay attention to our own experts in using this money in a way that makes the biggest impact to the Iraqis.

Q: That doesn't leave you feeling terribly cheerful about it?

COYNE: No, but at least it leaves an opening for my pipe dreams. We've got to find a way to do this better.

Q: Well, thank you very much for coming in and doing this with us. I think these will be important things for the future at least.

COYNE: It says something that USIP and you are the only people doing it, and the army isn't even debriefing their own folks when they come back.

Q: I hope we're doing something useful.

COYNE: Thank you.

Q: Thank you.

[END INTERVIEW]