

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

AARON WILLIAMS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviewed by: Jack Zetkovic
Initial interview date: October 1, 2004
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Aaron S. Williams is Vice President for International Business Development at RTI International, the consulting firm contracted by the Department of Defense to provide advice and assistance in Iraq on governance and reconstruction. Mr. Williams is a former career senior USAID official with extensive experience. He led a six-member "start-up team" that deployed first to Kuwait at the end of April, before hostilities concluded, and then into Iraq as the local security situation allowed. His team's first base in Iraq was Basra, where he hired a number of Iraqi technical experts and established the first of teams that RTI created in country.

The RTI team worked closely with ORHA and was regularly briefed by USG personnel, but it had to fend for itself regarding logistical, administrative, and security support. It bought its own vehicles, tents, food, fuel, and managed its own logistical pipeline. RTI created its own communications network and, because of the nature of its work, it was not hampered by the fact that this network was unclassified. RTI hired its own staff all along the way, focusing as much as possible on local Iraqis with administrative, business, and technical experience. This helped quickly to build the foundation for local governance; many of the local officials identified by RTI later transitioned easily into positions of responsibility on local councils. As RTI spread north into the rest of Iraq, RTI worked with these local councils to help establish a foundation for democratic involvement at a local level, it advised technocrats to improve basic services, and it reached out to citizens groups (examples: women, youth, veterans).

RTI representatives found that one of the best tools to create confidence and optimism in Iraq's future, and to establish support for the Coalition's goals and for the local councils, was its rapid response grants program – relatively small grants to be awarded to local councils to address immediate, local needs. These provided concrete evidence that the councils were increasing in effectiveness.

Mr. Williams believes that the entire effort in Iraq now hinges on the question of security. RTI had to hire private security guards for all its offices. On one occasion, it had to work informally with local individuals to rescue one of its kidnapped personnel. Following the uprising, RTI's work, and the work of the local councils, has become much more problematic. Without a firm foundation of vibrant local government – a foundation now threatened by security problems – Iraq will not enjoy a democratic future.

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Q: This interview is with Aaron S. Williams, Vice President in charge of International Business Development at RTI International. This interview is on behalf of USIP and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training as part of the Iraq Experience Project. Aaron, could you please describe your position in Iraq and when you started working there and how you got there?

WILLIAMS: Okay, thanks Jack. After RTI was awarded the contract to assist in the development and support of local government throughout Iraq. We selected a startup team that mobilized immediately, within two weeks following the award of the contract to go out to Iraq. I was part of that five-person startup team.

Q: What was the time frame of the awarding of the contract?

WILLIAMS: The contract was awarded mid-April, and we were asked by USAID to mobilize within two weeks, so by the end of April we were in Kuwait, because at that point in time Iraq was still not permissive for civilian work. We received a standard military orientation to Iraq at Fort Benning, and the rest of the time was spent planning and organizing the logistics and recruitment of the staff we anticipated needing for the Iraq contract. So the five of us trained together at Fort Benning and I was one of the five team members. My responsibilities were to assist in organizing a base of operations, first in Kuwait and then in Iraq. And, given the fact that we were a five person team, we all performed multiple duties. We all were involved in liaison with AID, with designing our initial systems for the recruitment process for the senior members of our team. Working in conjunction with our staff in our headquarters in Raleigh, North Carolina. So we all performed multiple tasks in terms of being part of the start of the team.

Q: Could you write down the names of the people in your team?

WILLIAMS: Sure. The team members were Ron Johnson, who was the leader of our team. He's our Senior Vice President for International Development at RTI. Peter Benedict, who has been selected to be the Chief of Party of the contract team that was going to be deployed to Iraq. Chuck Costello who was the Deputy Chief of Party. Burt Maggert who was the Director of Operations for the startup team, and Dick McCall who was the Senior Policy and Program Advisor from Creative Associates, who was one of the principal subs in the contract. So we arrived in Kuwait at the end of April. I can't remember the exact date, but it was the last week of April. We started to familiarize

ourselves and get briefed by AID. And at that time the ORHA, the Office of Humanitarian Reconstruction, under General Jay Garner, informed us of the situation that they anticipated we would encounter in Iraq, and we started organizing ourselves. We started buying vehicles and we established an office in Kuwait. We started attending regular debriefings, or briefings of the ORHA staff. We talked to all of the AID personnel who were based in Kuwait. We started focusing on what we thought would be the appropriate pose to take, based on what we had submitted in our proposal contract in terms of local government in Iraq. So it was a very busy time as you can imagine. RTI had not operated in Kuwait before. So we had to identify local staff, we opened up an office. We had to start a pipeline for our logistics and for all the material we were going to need to take into Iraq. Nothing at that point in time was going to be available in Iraq. We also set about trying to determine what our security requirements would be. And the gist of it is, really the basics, something that you would typically not encounter on a regular Foreign Service assignment. We had to look at vehicles, how we were going to be housed, and given that we thought we were probably being housed with the military, at least on a military compounds with very little resources, we took in everything we needed. We took in tents and food and fuel.

Q: Other material that you had to bring, office supplies?

WILLIAMS: We took office supplies, of course in this era now you have laptop computers for that, so that really reduced the amount of stuff we had to take in. But we tried to cover every potential eventuality. Fortunately we had, for example, Burt Maggert who was with us who had led the tank brigades in Desert Storm. So he was a person that knew pretty much what you needed to do to operate in the desert. And after about a week in Kuwait we got the call from ORHA to move into Iraq along with the first civilian teams who were going in. We weren't the first, we were part of the first wave that went in.

Q: Could I just go back for a second to the experience in Kuwait, who was your main liaison with AID at that time in Kuwait?

WILLIAMS: It was Lou Luck and Earl Gaz. Lou was the director of AID, of the AID office in Kuwait and Baghdad, and Earl Gaz was his deputy.

Q: So you would have gone into Iraq a little bit after them. Roughly.

WILLIAMS: That's correct. They had already started traveling into Baghdad. And our first assignment by AID was to go into southern Iraq, which was deemed the first area that was permissible. And so we entered into Basra and started setting up our first office in Basra. And again everything had to be started from ground zero, we needed to identify office space. We needed to hire local staff. We had to find out...

Q: Did you bring in local staff from Kuwait, or did you look to hire in Iraq?

WILLIAMS: We looked to hire in Iraq. We thought that would be very important that

we would hire Iraqis. We had a couple, we did take with us someone who was familiar with, who's boss was a Kuwaiti, but our intention was always to have as many Iraqi staff as possible. And we were very successful. In less than a week we had a significant number of Iraqi staff.

Q: Rough number?

WILLIAMS: I would say probably twenty, thirty.

Q: And their areas of responsibility, areas of expertise?

WILLIAMS: We hired a wide range of Iraqis, we had people who ended up becoming our senior advisors, for example, the former head of the English Department at the University of Basra. We hired a lot of people as translators who had worked for the British military authorities in Basra. We hired a number of engineers. We hired teachers. A lot of professional Iraqis who could help us, and we tried to hire as many people as we could who were bi-lingual.

Q: And how long were you there in Basra?

WILLIAMS: Well, we established an office in Basra. It was the first of our eighteen offices that we established in Iraq. And then we proceeded to move north. And as we moved up we established offices in the major cities.

Q: And what was the main focus of your work? Starting out in Basra and then moving on?

WILLIAMS: The main focus on our work was to work with the local councils that had been stood up by the military authorities after the end of formal hostilities. A broad cross-section of Iraqis. Merchants, doctors, lawyers, teachers. Clerics. People from all walks of life who represented the initial civil leadership that the military authorities were looking for.

Q: How was the atmosphere? Was it exciting? Was it exhausting? How would you describe it?

WILLIAMS: It was all of the above. First of all it was hard work because you're working in a hundred and ten degree heat. We had to meet a lot of people very quickly to ascertain what the situation was on the ground. We spent a lot of time in sessions with the British military in Basra, with the USAID officials who were operating in Basra. We spent a lot of time listening to the members of the Council in Basra to determine what their priorities and needs were, and trying to get a fix on what our top priorities would be. And the interesting thing about our project is that we had basically two aspects. First, to work with these councils and for the first time in Iraq to give the people a voice in governing themselves. Which had never happened under the Stalinist-type regime that Saddam Hussein had in place. Secondly, we also worked with the technocrats, the people

who had been running the technical department of the city, the person who ran the water, the Health Department, the sanitation, the garbage collection, etc., and the electric department; to help them do their jobs better and to start the process of training and technical assistance that would improve the delivery of services in that particular city. And then thirdly, we reached out to the rapidly growing civil society organizations, women's groups, veterans of the Iraq-Iranian war. People concerned about youth development. People getting together to try to improve the basic services in terms of garbage collection and water distribution in their area. A wide range of organization, religious groups, etc. And we engaged with them, and we were looking for ways to develop a linkage between the civil society of Iraq and citizens who now had a voice for the first time as part of this democratic transformation. And the councils that had been stood up by the military. And so we proceeded to do this. It pretty much followed the same pattern step-by-step as we moved north with our team into Iraq. At the same time we were starting to receive new people, there was a pipeline being recruited as we moved up.

Q: That is, Americans and other internationals or mainly Iraqis?

WILLIAMS: We had people from about thirty different countries. Our expat staff consisted of people from about thirty different countries.

Q: And they would fill up the organizations, the local office as you moved and expanded your work.

WILLIAMS: That's correct. We would appoint a team leader and that team leader would then start staffing up as people started moving in based on our massive recruitment effort in North Carolina and elsewhere.

Q: And your core group would keep moving though. Your group of five.

WILLIAMS: That's right. We continued to do kind of a reconnaissance, if you will, of the situation. Prior to moving into Kuwait, the night, literally, we were going to go into Kuwait, the AID and ORHA asked Ron Johnson to go to Baghdad to help create the neighborhood consuls and the basis for a city government in Baghdad. So Ron actually did not go in with us in southern Iraq. He went to Baghdad.

Q: You had said five, and you gave me a total of six names including yours, so he was in Baghdad and the others were with you.

WILLIAMS: Well actually there were six of us total, but five of us went in. And Ron flew to Baghdad. Along with one of our senior Iraqi-American expat advisors by the name of Amal Rassam.

Q: Where is she?

WILLIAMS: She is here, if she's not here she's probably gone out back to Iraq. She is

an academic from New York University who is a well known anthropologist who was one of our team members in Baghdad.

So Amal and Ron went to Baghdad. They were instrumental in setting up these eighty-eight neighborhood councils in Baghdad which then led to the creation of district councils and then the Baghdad City Council. What distinguishes Baghdad from the rest of the country in terms of local government development is that in Baghdad the coalition forces had this array of advisors such as RTI who were involved in creating the government in Baghdad. In the other parts of the country such as the south and the central part, these councils were created by the military authorities. And so our job was to assist the councils in carrying out their work for the first time.

So we proceeded north. We did our reconnaissance in Basra, then we went to Sama Waha, we went up to Hillah, we covered all of the major cities on our way as we moved north. We moved as far as Hillah for that first initial phase, and then of course Ron was working in Baghdad. So we had at that point not moved into Kurdistan. Nor had we started working in the Sunni triangle. So we were in the south, south-central. And in the central that includes all the major cities of Iraq: Kut, Najaf, Karbala. So there are eighteen provinces with governments in Iraq, and our objective was to establish an office in each of those governments. Each would have an expat team leader, both Iraqi and expat staff for each of the teams.

Q: Could you give me a rough idea of the time frame between when you first moved into Basra and then got your teams established throughout the places you wanted to have them established?

WILLIAMS: I would say it took us about six, oh probably three or four months to cover the entire country with our teams. Pretty fast actually. Because as you know we had to start from scratch to build up a team, and we ended up with about three-thousand staff in Iraq after about six months of which about two-hundred and fifty were expats, were Iraqi staff.

Q: And were there differing levels of success in the different areas?

WILLIAMS: Well in the early, in the first six months I would say all the way through the first year there was considerable success in terms of our three objectives. One, to work with local consuls, two, to work with the technocrats, and three, to work with civil society. We had a massive, a local support program, a so-called rapid response grants program, about fifteen million dollars. And we use those grants so that the councils could provide some tangible evidence, some concrete evidence of the fact they were trying to prove...

Q: To the people.

WILLIAMS: That's right, in the various cities and towns. We were engaged with the councils. The councils were of course changed, or 'refreshed' as the terminology was used in Iraq from time to time by the military if they were found not to be responsive or

effective or there was corruption involved. So we shifted gears and worked with the new council. But at all times our team leader worked with the governor of that particular province. We brought a wide range of technical skills based on the needs of the particular province. For example, we had city planners, we had budget directors, we had people who had been city managers in the United States and elsewhere in the world. We brought in electrical engineers, water engineers, solid waste management experts. Whatever specialty that was needed to manage a modern city or town we were able to provide that skill set as part of our team.

Q: Your general impression when dealing with the councils, was it more advice from your team, your expat team members about what was needed or requests from the local experts about what they needed?

WILLIAMS: I think it was a combination of both. We tried to frame our assistance so we would reflect what the Iraqis perceived as being necessary. The Iraqis are very talented, experienced people who had lived under a terrible regime. Many of these, the engineers and people who were involved in managing the service departments of the various cities were well-trained people who had quite a bit of experience. So we were able to rely on their advice and guidance and in most cases, of course what we brought to the table was a large amount of significant expertise in modern municipal management from a wide range of countries. People who were real state of the art, in management terms, of those cities and towns.

Q: Was there a particular nationality or group or type of person that you found to be most effective in your work?

WILLIAMS: Well I think obviously the Iraqi-Americans were probably the most effective. But I don't think nationality had anything to do with the level of effectiveness. It depended on the level of experience, the expertise, the types of situations that one of our advisors had been in previously. We tried to hire people who had been involved in these post-conflict transformative type situations.

Q: People with experience in other areas, where would they have worked before? The Balkans, Africa?

WILLIAMS: Given all of the conflicts that we face, Central America, the Balkans, Central Africa, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, East Timor. As I mention these examples, I'm thinking of the people on the team. We had all these collective experiences. In Russia, Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet empire. They worked everywhere. Some people had experience working in Vietnam.

Q: Wow. It surprised me how many people – I did a lot of work like this in the Balkans – and there was a very young group that I experienced there.

WILLIAMS: Working with which agency?

Q: Working with AID, mainly in AID contractors in Bosnia and elsewhere. And there were a lot of these very young people, but then some of the contractors have decades of experience. Like you say, going back to Vietnam in some cases. And people who are willing to say goodbye to friends and family for long periods of time and go to a very dangerous place.

WILLIAMS: It's quite amazing, quite courageous, quite extraordinary flexibility and talented people. The guy who was our team leader in Basra had worked in the village pacification program in Vietnam. Seventy-two years old.

Q: And willing to just go to Iraq.

WILLIAMS: That's right. He had been a city manager in a couple of different American cities, he had been chief of party in a number of large local government programs in Africa and Russia, in Asia. Quite an outstanding man.

Q: You said that it was about five or six months for all of your teams to be in place and functioning.

WILLIAMS: Probably three to four.

Q: Three to four.

WILLIAMS: Three to four months. At least the initial teams, and then we built up to our three-thousand level.

Q: Roughly when were you at the three-thousand level?

WILLIAMS: I'd say probably after, probably six or seven months.

Q: And once you were at that point, your main liaison with AID was of course in Baghdad, and that's where you were based.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, because most of the AID people were in Baghdad. But by that time of course we shifted from ORHA to the CPA. And there were CPA representatives in many of the provinces.

Q: But a number of the personnel switched over from ORHA to CPA, correct? Did you end up working with a lot of the same people?

WILLIAMS: Not necessarily. There was a lot of turnover. Actually the average tour in Iraq was probably three or four months on the U.S. government side. So our people were there, we served as continuity in many cases.

Q: And you found the people were then therefore much more effective, because they had time on the ground.

WILLIAMS: Oh sure, I mean a situation like Iraq, you build up relationships in a particular area. And those are invaluable in terms of doing your work.

Q: Did you find that when you were based in Baghdad did you travel around a lot or were you then mainly, once the teams were established, most of your work was in Baghdad in a management role?

WILLIAMS: Well we, I only stayed in Iraq on a temporary basis. I wasn't based there. I was there for about ninety days over the course of the last year and a half. But Peter Benedict, who's our Chief of Party is permanent and so is Chuck Costello. And Ron Johnson has made something like eight trips out there in the last sixteen months. Or eighteen months. And Burt Maggert has made many trips out there, and Dick Macall also made a couple trips out there. So the two who were permanent really were Peter and Chuck. And they were based in Baghdad. But they covered the entire country. The model is that we had an expat team leader in each of the eighteen provinces – actually it was seventeen, because we never established a team in Dahuk in the north. We serviced that out of Mosul. And then we had two offices in Baghdad, one in the green zone, and then another in central Baghdad in a place called the Marble Hotel. That group was for central Baghdad, they serviced the Baghdad province.

Q: How was the work of your teams affected by the security situation, overall?

WILLIAMS: Well, the security situation changed dramatically with the uprising in May of the Ramadi army uprising in Samarra. But before that, we took extraordinary security measures, we had our own security force. We had twenty-four hour static guards on all of our compounds. All of our people lived together on compounds, we didn't have people living in the general community. And we had great success at protecting our people.

Q: Did you have any losses of any kind or attacks?

WILLIAMS: We had three of our Iraqi employees murdered, and we had one of our expat staff kidnapped. We got him back. This was about four or five months ago, before the kidnapping turned ugly as it is now.

Q: The locals who were killed, were their murders specifically related to the work or could there have been some other...?

WILLIAMS: Certainly in a couple of cases there's no doubt about it.

Q: And how did you get the expat back?

WILLIAMS: Working through various channels.

Q: Okay. Enough said.

WILLIAMS: Non-U.S. government. (Laughs)

Q: Characterizing their work, the work of your teams now, what would you see as their most significant contribution?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I think in terms of our team's work over the past eighteen months, I'd say that, number one, we have worked with twenty-five thousand plus Iraqi local officials at the city, town, and provincial level. I was going to say government but provincial level, who now have been actively engaged in providing civilian leadership as part of this transformation. We provided them with extensive training, with the ability to talk to people who have a wide range of experience in lots of different countries. We've done the same thing with the people, the department heads who run the technical departments in the cities, exposing them to modern municipal management and financial management approaches. So I think from that standpoint, however the national and local elections end up in Iraq, they have a broad group of people who now have hands-on experience in the first phase of democratic governance. I think that's a major accomplishment for the U.S. Government. I think the second thing is that we have established channels for civil society organizations to engage in a dialogue in framing the issues that are important at the local level with these government authorities that are in place now. And that people have been in power in a way that they had not been before. Especially groups that had heretofore been absent from any opportunity to interact at the governmental level in Iraq because of the dictatorship. People such as women's groups and the religious minorities in mixed communities. Veterans who had not been heard from, people who were veterans of the Iraq-Iranian wars and suffered under Saddam. People who had special interests in helping the disabled. Just a wide range of groups that did not have a voice before, they now had a chance to speak out and play a role in this.

Q: And are they involved now, do they really feel as if they have a voice?

WILLIAMS: Well, certainly if you were blindfolded and went to any Iraqi provincial, let's say before the uprising in May, and sat down at one of these town hall meetings, it would be very much like a town hall meeting you would find in Wichita, Kansas or Tucson, Arizona or Fairfax, Virginia. Same kinds of issues. With a different level of intensity of course, because it was the first time many people had a chance to deal with these issues.

Q: And post-uprising, do you think that has significantly changed?

WILLIAMS: Well the security situation changes everything, sure. Our people are not as free to move around as we were before. We have to be much more cautious, we don't have as many ex-pat team leaders as we had before because of the security situation. So security is the key issue in Iraq now.

Q: Do you still have private security there?

WILLIAMS: Oh, of course. We have ex-pat security guards who travel with all of our people from point to point, then we have 24-hour static Iraqi guards under their overall command who protect our compounds.

Q: And what, how do you see things developing over the next month / year, with those teams, with the people who are on the ground? You mentioned that there were fewer ex-pat team leaders for security reasons, but would that also be seen as part of the process of handing things over to the local authorities?

WILLIAMS: Well, one of the things we've done as, in order to deal with the uprising and the crisis in the central part of the Iraq, is that we have celebrated our plans to trade over more and more responsibilities to senior Iraqis. So we had that in mind as the objective. We have to celebrate the process of doing that.

Q: An expectation. Over time, how do you think it will develop?

WILLIAMS: In terms of the local government?

Q: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think once there's a national election, then followed by local elections, I think the people that we have been working with for the past year and a half in most cases will end up holding office in Iraq.

Q: Because they're delivering now.

WILLIAMS: Well first of all because they're natural leaders in their communities anyway. And they have been able to serve as representatives for their communities with the coalition authorities. They have demonstrated they have the ability to deliver in some instances, and I think they will utilize what they've learned as part of this process to become strong candidates. And will end up as local officials. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised.

Q: Stepping back now, thinking about the broad span of you and your organizations experience. Training for getting in to Iraq, liaison communication with, mainly with AID, but ORHA, CPA. Looking to ways that it could have been done better. Things that could have been improved, things that were missing.

WILLIAMS: Well I think, but one of the things that I didn't mention to you that is a very important part of this, we had to establish our own communication network. Because there were no communications in Iraq. Couldn't communicate with Baghdad from the provinces and so forth. You could barely make out a cell phone call from Basra to Kuwait. And once you got north of Basra that was it. So we put in place, as a contractor, our entire network.

Q: You did that all on your own.

WILLIAMS: We did it on our own.

Q: There was no way for you to piggyback on anybody else's, it was just you.

WILLIAMS: Number one, the coalition authorities had enough to handle with their own communications. Given the wide range of contractors that were coming into the country, there was no way they were going to be able to handle them.

Q: So there were a lot of parallel communications.

WILLIAMS: And there's lack of a national system. There was no national telephone system to plug into. Nor was there a cell phone network in Iraq because Saddam obviously didn't allow that to exist.

Q: So a lot of parallel communication systems developed.

WILLIAMS: Oh sure. But that's not totally unusual. In this country parallel communications exist. Every company has its own parallel communication system right? We do in this building. I mean it's not unusual. It's just, it seems unusual because there was no national system to plug into in Iraq. Here it seems normal because it's all part of the broad U.S. communications network. But we still have our own systems. So we set up telephone communications, internet communications. We made sure that all of our people were well-equipped with hardened laptops. We brought in our IT people from North Carolina, and they hired people in the Middle East who had been experienced in setting these things up, so in all of those eighteen offices we had a full set of technicians. And the same thing in terms of our logistical support. We had to buy a tremendous number of vehicles. We had to arrange to have gasoline available for those vehicles, which was no mean feat given the fact that everything was controlled by the military and they had their own tremendous needs. So, and I have to admit, the cooperation, one thing that's important, and you'll hear this from my colleagues, the cooperation and support we had from the military was superb. Every step of the way, I mean the American military's, this is one of their finest hours.

Q: It's actually a consistent message we get, the extent to which interagency tensions did not happen because everyone was sort of in it together, and contractors, active duty, there were not a lot of walls built up between organizations.

WILLIAMS: There was a lot of coordination. More than what has been reported in the press.

Q: Why are you, what, can you give me an example of how coordination was surprisingly good, and why?

WILLIAMS: Well I think first of all because there were a lot of people on the ground who had experience in other theaters, such as the Balkans. Let me give you an example.

We were going to, let's say when we arrived in Samarra. We would of course go in and meet with the local military authorities at the base camp there, and they'd give us a briefing on what they considered to be the most important aspects of the local situation we need to know about, the priorities they had encountered in terms of talking to the local Iraqi officials, and we get a really good debrief from their civil affairs officers etc., so that gave us kind of a baseline as to what things we need to look at. And then we would explain our plan of action, what our blueprint was for the local government. And they were more than happy to turn over to us the direct engagement and oversight of the local government activity. So that was just one example. That was pretty the way it followed every step of the way.

Q: Pretty important example.

WILLIAMS: They happened very quick, we're talking about within twenty-four, forty-eight hours we were engaged, and at least we had an agreement as to what we were going to do. Then they had to wait for our staff to arrive in that particular town or city, where they would start operating.

Q: And was that easy, was it because of the recognition of your expertise, or shared experience, personal contacts? Why did it work well?

WILLIAMS: I like to think it was because of our expertise. The team we took in had something like a hundred and fifty years of experience. So when we sat down and talked to, you know, all of us who were senior Foreign Service Officers who had served at the head of large missions around the world, manage billions of dollars and hundreds of people. We knew how to operate in this kind of environment, even though none of us had worked in Iraq before. And I think that was a recognition of that, and in some cases we had to earn that respect over the course of a few weeks, but we at least had the experience and the background to be able to do that. I think that was number one. Number two, I there was a tremendous need. The military had their hands full trying to govern an entire sector in various different areas of activity. So if you could have a group come in and say "I'm gonna take care of this particular part of your assignment." why wouldn't you want to cooperate, right?

I mean, just to give you a little anecdote, we went into Basra. We sat down and briefed the commanding general for Basra from the British Army, and he said, "You know, what I need in Basra, is I don't have anyone on my general staff who has experience in managing a city. You guys are gonna be the local government team. What can you do?" I said, "Sitting right next to you, General, is a guy who has managed two American cities and has been Chief of Party in three different countries and large local government programs." He says, "When can he start?" And we said, "He can start tonight." And he started just like that.

Q: That's a pretty good example.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. But we were able to replicate that in lots of places.

Q: You had mentioned communications. Any other specific areas that you think could have been managed better from the beginning, or things that you saw along the way that needed improvement?

WILLIAMS: I think from our own standpoint we probably could have brought in more admin people in the beginning. I think we underestimated the number of admin people that we should have had on the ground right away.

Q: From the outside? Or locally hired. From Kuwait on or from North Carolina?

WILLIAMS: From North Carolina. We recruited quite a few administrative people, but we should have brought more of them in in the first wave. That's one thing that I think would have been helpful. Because we underestimated the need for administrative support as the initial team moved up towards the north. But in terms of the recruiting of our technical advisors and the programmatic people, that went probably as fast as one could possibly expect, given such a short lead time.

Q: So the admin people you would have wanted to have more of logisticians, what kind of people?

WILLIAMS: Procurement people. Logistical support people, communications people. People to run our networks. Not just to set 'em up but to run the networks. You know, because we had to set up a comprehensive, vertically integrated operation in each of these provinces. You have to think about it from the standpoint of a typical American Embassy, what do you have? You have an admin section, you have a decon section, you have someone who has a motorpool underneath the admin section, you've got somebody who takes care of your computers. And we also have to be worried about housing, security, all of those different areas we have to cover, and so we had to have a senior person in each of the eighteen provinces, in each of those diverse areas.

Q: Wow.

WILLIAMS: So we had the model but we didn't, we could have moved in more admin people right away. The other thing is that the infrastructure in Iraq didn't improve in a significant way based on what early expectations were. The National Phone Network took forever to get up. You had less electricity than you thought you were going to have. And so we had to be self-contained.

Q: And the situation now? Are they as self-contained or they can rely more on national networks, nationwide systems?

WILLIAMS: Well I think security now has really become the trump card, because even if you could rely on the national system and network and support structure, it isn't safe enough for you to do that. So you still, in the case of our work around the country. And you have to remember that we're one of the few nationwide contractor groups in Iraq. A

lot of the other technical advisory teams worked in Baghdad.

Q: When was the last time you were there?

WILLIAMS: I was last there in October.

Q: Would you do it again?

WILLIAMS: Oh sure, yeah.

Q: That's what everyone says. They all say yes.

WILLIAMS: You know, this is what we do. This was an extraordinary opportunity. This is the largest reconstruction program in the history of the United States since the Marshall plan. The cooperation and support that we received in carrying out this task was extraordinary. We recruited some of the best people we've ever had in the world to work with. Just innumerable stories of people doing things that no one would have expected people to be able to do under these circumstances.

Q: How do you see the future unfolding?

WILLIAMS: That all depends on security. There's a couple thing that are important in Iraq. Number one, security. Establishing a place where Iraqis feel secure in their own country. Number two, job creation. Create enough jobs to get people off the streets, into some productive areas so they can develop a work ethic and be able to earn income to support their families. Number three, some democratic form of government at the central level and at the local level, and that would include, I would say, in a Parochial way, but I think it's quite evident to anybody who's looked at these kinds of transformations. There needs to be a balance between central control of Iraq and strong, vibrant local government. To give Iraqis in very diverse country a say in their lives and local law. Because central government can't do it all.

Q: Those are a lot of requirements.

WILLIAMS: So those are the top. The others things I think are understood and assumed this will occur. There will be more oil revenues, obviously. The oil revenue is already up, as long as they can get their security, then the oil's going to flow. And so Iraq has a tremendous advantage over most of the developing world. They've got oil, they've got talented people.

Q: Educated population.

WILLIAMS: Educated population. They've got tremendous infrastructure; the road network is superb. That's one thing which has not really been destroyed by the insurgency. They could easily have an outstanding telecommunications network, without a doubt, and people to run it. The Arab cultural potential in Iraq is enormous, that hasn't

even been touched. I mean, after all, this is Mesopotamia. The cradle of civilization. I mean if you travel through the central parts of Iraq, you see these oases where you could grow just about any crop that you want, it's quite amazing. So I think there's, I'm somewhat optimistic, if those first three factors I identified can be put in place. Those are big ifs.

Q: Those are big ifs. But, you and your organization are going to work on it.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we are.

Q: Keep up with it.

WILLIAMS: Certainly intend to continue. We're in our second year.

Q: Second year. And it's an annual contract?

WILLIAMS: Well, we were the only reconstruction contractor that was renewed.

Q: Congratulations.

WILLIAMS: Well thank you. We like to think it's because of the caliber and determination and courage that our people demonstrate on the ground.

Q: Thanks for the interview. Do you have anything else that you want to add, any other personal comments, anything else to add to the record?

WILLIAMS: Well I think working in the Iraq reconstruction program, and our continued work in the Iraq reconstruction program, is one of the examples of a rare opportunity in life where you can really make a difference in a place where it is really important. And do something that is number one, to the great benefit of the Iraqi people in this case, but also contribute to something that's significant to America and what we believe to be important and to support a very important leadership role that America plays in this world these days.