

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

P. J. DERMER
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviewed by: Arma Jane Karaer
Initial interview date: August 22, 2004
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Col. Philip J. Dermer, age 47, started his career with the U.S. Army as a helicopter pilot, and in 1996 became a Middle East Foreign Area Officer Specialist with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). He is a graduate of the University of Montana, spent one year as an exchange student at Haifa University, and holds a Master's Degree in National Security Studies from Georgetown University. He served with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq from May, 2003, until June, 2004, and is currently enrolled at the National Defense University.

Dermer was sent to Iraq by the DIA to set up a military attaché's office. In the absence of either an American Embassy or an Iraqi institution with which to liaise, he attached himself to the CPA, where he spent about four months helping to create local government councils in Baghdad and approximately eight months helping to design and build an Iraqi Ministry of Defense.

LOCAL COUNCILS:

The first half of the interview addresses the formation of the local government councils. Dermer describes local government in Baghdad during Saddam Hussein's regime, which Dermer sees as primarily self-serving sinecures for regime loyalists with little regard for public service.

He says that ORHA, and later the CPA, were unprepared for the collapse of local government in Iraq, had no pre-invasion plan for replacing those entities, and were relying on individual Coalition military units to provide emergency services, a task for which those units were also unprepared and unsupplied.

He describes the rushed, ad hoc nature of planning for the formation and "selection" of new local councils and the extremely limited available resources, human and material, for carrying out that task. As he describes the project, the tiny team devoted to this huge task was creative and personally courageous in its attempts to explain the new system to the Baghdad public, to secure nominees, conduct votes and initiate the councils. Their goal, he says, was to introduce the idea of democratic choice and responsibility through this process.

However, in spite of a superhuman effort and because there was no mass media or other effective means to publicize the undertaking, they were able to contact only limited numbers of people, and many Baghdadis never knew that votes were held until the councils were established. He says he believes that most of the Iraqis who participated never understood the difference between the CPA's "selection" process, a vote which was adjusted at the CPA to ensure minority representation, and a true "election."

He points out that many who showed up at the organizational meetings used them primarily as a means to ask the CPA personnel conducting them for help with personal problems, most of which could not be addressed. He also asks whether the councils can operate as intended without outside advisers to guide them through the process of orderly debate and execution of decisions.

He comments that since one of the stated goals of the invasion was to establish democracy in Iraq as an example to the rest of the Middle East, the establishment of democratic entities in Iraq deserved better pre-invasion planning and far greater commitment of resources than it actually got.

MINISTRY OF DEFENSE:

Although Coalition policy initially was to leave the formation of a ministry of defense and an intelligence capability to the Iraqi government established after the adoption of a constitution, by November, 2003, Dermer says, it was apparent that a civilian-led ministry was necessary to coordinate the security role that the Coalition wanted Iraqi military elements to undertake.

While the CPA leadership debated whether to authorize this process, he and two other people in the CPA Office of National Security began brainstorming how a Western-style, civilian controlled Iraqi Ministry of Defense could be organized.

He points out that, unlike the other ministries reforming in Baghdad, the Ministry of Defense had to be completely different from its pre-invasion, military led and dominated, form. Drawing on his experience and contacts made in forming the local councils, he toured the country, soliciting applications from and interviewing persons who his team thought understood the concept of civilian control of the military and had the necessary managerial skills and experience to make the new ministry work.

He describes how his small team designed and funded a training program and put the top three tiers of a new ministry in place in less than eight months.

Again, he wonders if this organization will survive and operate as designed without foreign advisers to assist in its initial phases. As in the case of the local councils, his story describes an ad hoc, rushed, under-resourced operation which was supposed to create an institution key to the democratization of a formerly totalitarian state.

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Q: Today is August 22, 2004. This is an interview with Colonel P. J. Dermer being done on behalf of the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training as part of the Iraq Experience Project. I am Arma Jane Karaer. Colonel Dermer, what was your assignment when you went to Iraq?

DERMER: I began with what was called a small group that was going out with Ambassador Bremer. Prior to that it was going to be ORHA, but it ended up being Ambassador Bremer. Our primary job was to work national governance issues for Iraq. Within that team, though, after a few weeks in Iraq, I ended up working on local governance based upon a request from the Baghdad Central team that was there. They asked me if I would help them set up the Baghdad City Council. So I branched off and did that for several months, the time it took us to do it.

Then I came back to the States, and I had to change headquarters and redo my orders. I went back out and ended up working for the Office of National Security Affairs, which was formerly the office that was responsible for setting up the Ministry of Defense, the national security institutions, the intergovernmental security apparatuses, and also the institutions that sort of set up a mini-interagency process. It started out as a Defense-DID directive, but the name changed several times, mainly because we were not allowed to call it a Ministry of Defense until way late in the game. So it was never called Ministry of Defense office: it was the Office of National Security Affairs, Defense Institution Development (DID); that's one of the beginning names of the office. So I did that from the end of September until the end of the CPA. I was there for the duration.

Q: Let's start with your work on the governance issue. Can you tell me briefly what kind of local government Baghdad had before the end of Saddam Hussein's regime?

DERMER: I wasn't the expert on this. Luckily we had someone in our group that was. It had a functioning government in the sense that there were positions and there were titles and there was a mayoralty. There was a governate, which is the next level up. There are 18 governates in Iraq. It had public works, it had trash collection, it had anything that you would have in a normal city government, but they weren't responsible or accountable to anyone other than Saddam and his Baath Party. So whereas there were basic services in Iraq, and some of them were good while some of them were poor, the fact of the matter is that all these governmental and leadership institutions were filled by party apparatchiks and Baath Party members and senior military members and friends of Saddam and family members of other people. So there was a

governance system in Iraq. They had a governor, who was a party member, of course, and then below each governor there were some mayoral councils. There were some other various levels within each governate depending upon which governate it was. In Baghdad it was a central government, the central city council for Iraq, the “amanet” [phonetic], as they say in Arabic, or a mayoral institution, and Baghdad actually had a little bit different concept of how it reached to the national level than we have in the United States. Baghdad had that connection, but it wasn’t a fully responsible, accountable organization whatsoever.

Q: Responsible to the...?

DERMER: Public at large, Iraqis at large. It was responsible for maintaining its own privileges more than it was for providing any services in Iraq. It had no real say in anything; it was all for show only. Hands were raised, votes were taken, people were “elected”—we call them “selected”—and daily life went on, but none of these institutions were ever responsible to the Iraqi public at large.

Q: What happened to these institutions at the time of the invasion?

DERMER: They basically dissolved. One, because of the war. There was no one for them to serve during the war. Almost everything shut down. Two, once we came on board and started bringing on our concepts of how we were going to govern Iraq after Saddam, we held in abeyance all of the former institutions. Nothing was allowed to retake its previous shape at first, or at all, until we said so, until we gave them our political plan for Iraq, or we developed a political plan for Iraq. “We” being the U.S. Then that’s exactly what we did over the next year, or tried to do over the next year, from national down to local. They (the local government structures) took various forms and shapes. Each one is a different story in each governate, because we never had a coherent strategic plan when we entered Iraq. We never had one from Washington, and then once we hit the ground in Iraq, we never had one at all for months and months and months until we tried later on.

Q: Why was there no plan for replacing these institutions? After all, we knew that the place was going to be very badly disrupted.

DERMER: We never got there. Number one, we just never got there in our strategic planning, in my view. Number two, we didn’t understand the nature of the task at hand. That became clear to me as I watched the development of Jay Garner’s group and of our group and Bremer’s group, of all the groups. Number three, we didn’t have the time when we got finished planning for the war and planning for the Coalition and all these other things. We did do humanitarian assistance planning, and there was planning for refugees, the two main post-war items based upon other wars, but we just never got down to the nitty-gritty of what kind of shape the Iraqi political system should take from A to Z. We just never got there. Put all those together and by the time we hit Iraq we had to make it up as we went.

Q: Okay, the local government has headed for the hills, and our people who have come in to replace it haven’t got a plan yet.

DERMER: From the beginning we never had the numbers to do the job.

Q: Who was providing local services in that case? Who was collecting the garbage and putting out fires when they occurred and that sort of thing?

DERMER: First off, we thought that a lot of these institutions would continue as is. We did not expect them all to collapse, all to cease. But in the face of the war and then the looting and then the vacuum afterwards and then the waiting for us to do something, based upon the culture of Iraqis, the Middle East and what Saddam did to them, you literally had a standstill of sorts in life as Iraqis knew it, as we thought Iraq would be. So it fell actually at the end of the day on the soldiers, to each individual combat unit, to not worry about how they were going to hurt somebody or fight, because in most places that settled down a little bit; in others it didn't. They literally had to wake up each morning and say, number one: "Okay, how are we going to get basic civic services running from where our unit now sits?" Number two, the Iraqis started to go to the military and say, "Okay, where's our electricity? Sewage is in the streets. What are you going to do about it?" Iraqis immediately set upon us. They saw us as occupiers, and we tried to claim we weren't, but we were. The next thing we knew the soldiers had an unplanned and unguarded mission, which they were capable of doing but unprepared to do. It wasn't planned in any large sense. They just woke up and the sergeant said, "Okay, I'll get a truck and we'll go." It was completely ad hoc, piecemeal, for the entire country. It was not just for a locale; it was for the entire country. It was a mess.

Q: Now let's get back to you. You have arrived with the initial team that was supposed to start working on putting back a government structure in Iraq. Can you just tell me what happened to you and which organization you got into and what you tried to do there?

DERMER: I came over with a small group from OSD (Office of the Secretary of Defense). They finally flew us in. We didn't have a strategic plan as to how we were going to get there or when we were going to go. It was "you will go, you won't go, two of you will go, four of you will go, four of you will go and six will come later." We never got this rolling so well either as any kind of smooth operative plan. Finally the word came to go and we flew over in a C-17, a bunch of us, various levels, various responsibilities. There was political - national level group. I was part of a small group for that, something like eight to ten of us from various places around Washington. There were a couple of senior economics guys, senior guys for security and what-not. We landed in Baghdad at night. They took us to the palace. We had no idea where we were. I had been part of a small group that went in April for a second political conference that they had before the war ended, so this was our second time back.

General Garner met us in the hallway. He was a bit apprehensive about us because we weren't necessarily under his purview. We were going to be either beside him or co-located. Nobody was really sure exactly how we were going to work with Garner. By this time Bremer had been announced and we had met Bremer and had dinner with Bremer. So we knew that Bremer was going to be in charge of us. It wasn't quite sure then that he was going to run the whole shebang per se. I think some people knew it; we didn't. Very shortly thereafter it was announced that he would be the person in charge.

So we woke up the next morning and kind of looked around the palace and got our feet on the ground. We really didn't know what we were going to do or were supposed to do. We didn't really have any plan when we went over. We knew there had been some political maneuvering in Washington, of course, the year before about who would run Iraq, and there had been some favorite sons. There were some people that we thought we could work with, a small group that we kind of nominated: Chalabi and the Kurdish leaders and several other parties from SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and what-not. That was kind of the foundation that we were going to start with, but we had no idea where it was going to go and how we were going to do this. Everybody tried to find their own niche or find their own way for a few days, a week or two, trying to do some work, waiting for Bremer to come in and see what he was going to do and where we were going to go from there.

I was working on a concept that I had started in Washington to support CENTCOM's request to get governmental support teams in all the 18 governates in Iraq. CENTCOM had had a really good leaning toward an idea that we had to get some kind of political development in Iraq soonest. They had tried doing some in Afghanistan. Several of us in Washington had said that if we did not get the political stuff straight, everything else would be irrelevant. We were thinking more on the local level than the national level but, either/or, in some way you have to nail this no matter what else you do in Iraq, and we weren't getting there. We didn't have a plan before we hit Iraq. CENTCOM was trying to push this, to get teams out in each governate that would be comprised of political types, legal types, police types, military types, whatever, and they were having a very tough time getting it through the system. So I started on that right away, because I firmly believed that we had to get this rolling early. I don't care whatever else happens; we've got to get political constructs moving. There was no strategic plan. Garner's guys didn't come up with a deep-level plan for themselves either, and they were out there for two months before we got there; and they were supposed to develop one.

So I figured, I'll take that on, even though it's a big one. Well, in the process of doing that, several of the people that had been with Garner in Kuwait and were in the Baghdad city group for setting up the local governance for Baghdad, the mayor of the governate on down, were working with me, and they asked me to help them set up local councils in Baghdad, all throughout the Baghdad governate. I said, "Okay, I guess I can do that. I need to go with somebody or go with you guys first, and then I'll see how it is." Well, lo and behold, Bremer came in, and several of the group started talking to the various expats and the various guys that had come into Baghdad, Chalabi and Allawi, etcetera, bouncing between them and trying to set up meetings, a group, a council. I worked with them on that at first. I set up the first meeting for Bremer with all of the "Gang of Six," they called it, or a few more. But then very shortly after that, I could see where that was going and who was going to work on that, how many they needed to do that, and I asked if I could stay on the direction I was going originally. I wrote a paper for Bremer on that, and they said, "Yeah, keep doing this."

Q: You mean working on the Baghdad governate?

DERMER: The Baghdad national governance thing; I was pushing very hard for this. Ambassador Bremer did not want State or legal types or political types to work out in these governates. His thought we should have contractors doing it. There was a plan prior to our

hitting Baghdad, a small plan, that USAID would subcontract various groups that had done this before around the world, in East Timor and others, to go set up governance teams in the governates to do this kind of local stuff. That's as far as it had gotten. There were contracting and planning going on to do this. We just never knew when it was going to come to Iraq. Once we saw the plan, it was supposed to be quite a few people, because it takes numbers of 10s and 20s and 30s in each area. We hadn't broken down the areas. We didn't know that they were going to have 18 governates like they had had under Saddam. We didn't know any of this yet. We had free rein; we could have done anything we wanted in Iraq. But there was the thought that some professionals would come in who had done this before and sit down and go to work from A to Z. But they weren't there and the war was over, sort of, at that time, we thought. We were there, and I got asked to do this, and I said, "Great. How many of you are there?" This American said, "Well, there are four of us." I tried to convince the Ambassador to use professional types to do the job. I did convince him at the end of the day that we needed real-world political entities that would link the rest of Iraq to the CPA so that whatever Bremer put out would be put out uniformly all throughout Iraq, and vice versa. That would be part of the job of these teams that we would eventually develop. They never did develop until September/October.

Q: Of 2003?

DERMER: Yeah. It took that many months to even get the concept off the ground, for many reasons we'll go into later.

Q: And you're talking about teams made up of contractors?

DERMER: Contractors would be a part of it, and that was also one of the issues. There'd be military guys; there'd be security from the military; there'd be contractors that were doing functions like electricity, sewage, law, and the oil back-up. These would all be members of each group. There'd be local governance guys; there'd be education guys. There would be little teams that would go out and do all these basic functions of life in each governate. It hopefully would be linked to some greater plan of uniform development. We never got there, but that was the plan. Well, concurrently when I got asked to do the local stuff in Baghdad, I went out to watch what they were doing. They were just trying to get local leadership developed, period, and also take part of the task away from the Army, because the Army was clearly wanting to get out of this business. Their goal was to fight the war and then be done. And we all truly expected that there would be other folks going in there, contractors, but the Army was there and we were there.

About a week or two after Bremer got there, he said, "If we're going to develop local councils and political councils out in the governates, that's okay, but if we're going to have a national government you'd better get me a local government set up at the center soon, and first or concurrently. I can't have a national system with nothing at the center and yet political development out in the governates." We concurred and said, "Yeah, absolutely." Baghdad was the central local government before the war, like Kabul. We didn't know at this time how long it would take to get a national government or whether it would have a prime minister or president.

We ended up getting 25 as the rotating governing council, but we didn't know at the time what we'd have.

So, what we had started to work out on our own became formal and official. Bremer said he wanted it done by the first of July, and we got the order in about the middle or third week of May. The person that helped us do this, Andy Morrison, who was our strategic guide, was State Department. To me, he was the strategic genius on Iraq; he just knew Iraq. He was the guy who could tell you A to Z about the governance system. He was the person who asked me to help him and join him. There was a professor from City University in New York, Doctor Amal Rassam, an expatriate from Iraq. Her family was Baath Party, but she came back to Iraq to local governance. We had a translator, and there was a person from USAID who had done this in East Timor.

I'd been out with a local military unit with them once or twice, just to see what they were talking about, just getting together with small groups of Iraqis and saying, "Hey, you guys, who's in charge here?" It was fascinating because there was nothing going on. The units were trying to find local leaders to get things done, to get local services started, all on their own. They were already doing that, but all by different means. There was no script that they were working from. Then everyone heard Major General Petraeus had tried to set up a council in Mosul and had got it going rather quickly. So there were efforts, but they were just efforts.

Then once we got the formal word, we said, "We'd better get together and decide what the council should be." We had Andy, who had the knowledge from before. We also had an Iraqi, Doctor Farris, who had been in the Baghdad municipal city council prior to the invasion, a Baath Party guy but someone who had clearly shown his desire and his intent and his loyalty to work with the Coalition. Andy and he had linked up several times as a contact, and he had ideas and he could help us to get with Iraqis.

Now, at the time, of course, the environment was non-permissive, so we had no means to get out. We had a whole list of things to do. First, we had to decide what we were going to build. Bremer just said, "Give me a city council." Andy and I and Doctor Rassam and a USAID person and others sat around and said, "Okay, how big should it be? What level are we looking at?" We had to decide that. Hours of meetings and yelling—we had no past script to look on; we had no after-action report from anywhere else. None of us had done this before. None of us had built city councils or done local governance except for the AID person, Chris. But we all knew the Middle East, so we knew what we were up against, we knew what we faced.

So we said, "Okay, the council can't be that big. No matter what happens, it can't be too big." So we sat there for a while and said, "Well, how big is big?" It was at about nine or ten o'clock at night that we were doing these meetings, and we said, "20-some, 30-some? 30-some is too big. How about 20-some? What are the needs in Baghdad?" Andy had an idea of the structure of governance before. There were nine districts in Baghdad, akin to maybe a city-county combination, and within the districts were neighborhoods, and within the neighborhoods there were sectors, as the Iraqis called them. We would call their sectors neighborhoods. Should we stay with nine districts? Okay, we'll go with nine districts, because the maps were drawn and Iraqis understand that. They identify themselves by those districts. They also identify

themselves by neighborhoods. Okay, great. How many neighborhoods were there in each district? Andy had most of that information, and we had the previous postal maps.

Okay, that was an issue, because, while in the best of best cases we would have liked to have done each of those neighborhoods, there were a lot of neighborhoods and at this time we didn't have the resources to cover them all. We all knew that somehow or other the Army was going to get involved, but we didn't know how. So we gerrymandered the neighborhoods the best we could. Most we left alone, but others needed to be changed, like Sadr City. Sadr turned out to be critical for many reasons. Sadr was the biggest, had the most people, had the most concentrated population, mostly Shiite. It was the biggest wreck of a place. Sadr just stood out and everyone knew it. Sadr had 10 to 12 neighborhoods before the war. We decided to make six for elective purposes. We had to do this all throughout Baghdad. We'd drawn the map, and then we said, "Should we go down to sectors?" We said, "Well, we didn't have time to do neighborhoods. How in the hell are we going to do sectors?"

We found out later that that would have been the right thing to do had we had time, because Iraqis had problems with not having representation by each sector. They also didn't understand later in the process that if their sector representative was not on the neighborhood council, it was okay, because the neighborhood is responsible for all sectors, but Iraqis didn't understand that as far as I can tell. This is one of the problems of putting our systems on them.

Okay, so we don't do sectors but we'll do neighborhoods. We gerrymander the neighborhoods, we do all nine districts, and again we come back to the question of how many people do we want on the council. First off, we decided to do a senate-congress combination. By population we would have different proportional representation by neighborhoods, so if you had Sadr City, you would have 15 reps on a neighborhood council, whereas in a smaller area you'd have five. But then in the city council we'd have three per district, which would give you 27, and then we added one or two slots to make sure that we had the right minority representation. We called this a selective process. In Arabic the terms were different, 'election' and 'selection'. That failed to translate at the end of the day anyway. To Iraqis they were elections, not selections, but we tried to use the Arabic term 'selection' and explain that's what we were doing.

Q: What did you think the difference was?

DERMER: The difference, of course, is that in elections the voters actually decide; but in selection there's sometimes large input by us, direction, pushing, cajoling. We would not allow the election to settle the result. We would take the votes, calculate them, and if 27 Sunnis were running an area, we would work it that somebody else, a Shia, for example, got on the council. We managed the process to get what we thought would begin proper representation in the system. It was way harder than that, of course, but that was our goal. So I think we settled on something like 27 or three per district plus one or two. Neighborhoods would be proportional, based on population, but nobody knew the population of anything. Andy had some numbers from a census that was done way back and some numbers that were given to us by the Oil For Food coupons, but none of it was real because Oil For Food represented families—one coupon was by family; it wasn't by household member—and there weren't any real censuses done, and the population moved so much during Saddam's regime, migration and people coming to urban

areas. Sadr City especially had over 1,000,000-plus. You'd ask a Sadrite and they'd say 2,000,000 and the Kurdish would say 3,000,000. We didn't know, so we did the best we could mathematically .

We were doing this at four or five in the morning. In about two and a half days, I think, we knocked out a plan for the city council, a strategic plan—yelling, pushing, shoving, cussing in all three languages—your military guys, Andy, the State guys, Doctor Rassam sitting there. None of us ever worked together before in our lives and now within days we were forming this. Then we said, “Great. Here’s the plan, but who’s going to do this, and how do we get it done? Well, we have to make the army do it.” The army, of course, had fought the war.

Q: Excuse me. What does “this” mean? You mean go out and find the candidates for the council?

DERMER: No, I'll get to that. We didn't know what it meant, “this” meaning how to get the process started toward elections. We were going to do an electoral/selectoral process. So we'd done the strategy. Now we had to do the operational framework. We had to say, “The army's got to do this. They're the labor. We will have to be the overall providers of guidance, direction, keeping it on track, quality control.

Again, in any other world, a group of 100, 500 should have been doing it; it should have been Jimmy Carter, whoever. It would have taken hundreds of people to actually do this in any kind of real sense. So we knew it wasn't real. We knew it wasn't going to be the final say. What we were trying to do was set up a process, an initial bearing for the country and for Baghdad, to get it started. It couldn't be the formal process without a legal system, without electoral rules, without any kind of rule of law, without a census, without knowing who's living where and where they're from. So we were just simply seed planting, if you will, but really more than that, because we had to put the body we created to work once it was selected, and, oh, by the way, they were not going to get paid. We had no payments.

Q: Who's not going to get paid?

DERMER: Any of the Iraqis that were selected to any of the councils weren't going to get paid initially.

So then we had to draw up the operational plan, to break it down in timelines. Okay, if this had to be up by X date, if Bremer said he wants the city council by 1 July, okay, when do we have to have the districts finished, when do we have to have the neighborhoods finished, when do we have to get out to the neighborhoods? We said, “Okay, a week; we need a week between district and city council.” We didn't have any idea, but we said a week. We didn't know. Okay, so two weeks, but how many between neighborhood and district? “Two weeks.” “Two weeks? How about 10 days?” Nobody knew. Amal would say, “10 days,” and somebody would say, “12.” We didn't know. And we backed it up until the date that we were sitting there that night.

Then we had to draw up an order for the army, the Third Infantry Division still there from the war. We had to draw it up, and then we had to divide Baghdad up so we could assign the army

the sectors that they were living in. Of course, the military lines of combat were not overlaid on any of the municipal boundaries. That couldn't have happened if you planned it. We would do that later. We would adjust how the incoming army divisions positioned themselves in Baghdad by where we needed electoral and management balance for the Baghdad political system. That's a first, and not easy to do, but we did. We said, "This brigade has to be along these lines because it's writing the order for the election and setting up the pilot here." Okay, and the commanders all agreed, and we made it happen. It was a plus. Andy did that. So we briefed the order to the Third Infantry Division. We got it approved through Bremer over to the senior leadership down. It's called writing an operational order, "frag order," for the army, in their military terms.

By this time we had enlisted the help of a lieutenant colonel who is a reservist that had been a mayor in Glendale, Colorado. He would become our Pulitzer Prize writer and organizer of books and details and spreadsheets of who was elected and of "this is how you do an election; this is what we want the councils to do."

Andy would manage the strategic movement of the whole thing, talking to the senior commanders.

Amal Rassam and I became the two that went throughout Baghdad. She and I went into the streets of Baghdad. That's what we did for two months. I started in Sadr City. They wanted me to go to Sadr first, and over the next months—this is in the journals that I kept—we would meet up with an army lieutenant or captain or whoever was assigned at that level, give them guidance on what they should think about. We had no mass media, we had no mass informational campaign. We tried. We couldn't get it done. We tried to use the military vehicles that had all the loudspeakers; couldn't get that done. They were busy doing other things, applying a lot of stick to the Iraqis, and we were trying to give them a few carrots.

So Andy and Amal and I and a few others would spend nights on the computer and we'd type up a PowerPoint chart, put it in Arabic, print off as many copies as the printer would allow before the printer would burn up or until we got kicked off, or the copier burned out. We'd take this pile of information papers, eight by eleven, and we'd go out to the corners and hand them out throughout Baghdad, the best we could. We needed 50,000 or 5,000,000; we had 25, 50, maybe 100 a day. We gave them to lieutenants, and the lieutenant would go into his measly operations center and make 10 more till his copier wouldn't work anymore. We would start trying to explain to the Iraqis in Baghdad what we wanted to do.

We had a small newspaper at that time, a Coalition newspaper, and it had only a circulation of 50,000 in a city of 5,000,000. This was a strategic shortcoming, this information campaign. Our information was not as important as putting other things in the paper at times. So it came down to us working from seven in the morning till midnight to get out our information. Like I said, it was Amal and I mostly. Andy would come out only once in a while, because he was busy with the management and making sure the CPA knew what we were doing and getting the maps drawn. Everyone had more chores than any one person could ever do.

Q: What did your flyers tell the people?

DERMER: In the first ones we put out we told them, “This is what’s about to happen,” period, in very simple language: “We are going to rebuild the Baghdad City Council”. I have all those materials. “This is what it’s going to look like.” It was classic. You had people who wanted to write biographies and papers, and we had to tell them, “No, you get one page, and also you get one diagram. Make it very simple.” We did it in PowerPoint: city, district, neighborhood. We laid out each neighborhood, each district, and then we told them who could be in it, and then on a page or two the next time we’d go out we’d say how we wanted the process to work. We wanted a small sampling of the population, if possible. We wanted to caucus essentially. The information sheet gave the time for a meeting and “We would love to have everybody participate. We would love to have everybody vote. Regardless, we want everybody to know about the process even if you can’t participate. Here’s what it means, if you don’t get a chance to vote, if you don’t get a chance to come forward to volunteer to be a representative.” That’s what we wanted first. “Your interests will still be represented by the nature of the body being established.”

None of this took hold. None of this was ever understood except by a very few. But there was nothing we could do; we believed we had to go down this road. We would have failed miserably—I don’t know how successful we’ll be anyway; we don’t know today—had we not understood the Middle East. That was the center of gravity for getting as far as we did.

Soldiers would come up to us all the time and say, “I don’t know how you’re doing this. I don’t know how you have enough patience. I can’t believe you’re doing this.” They were in awe of us. We were in awe of them because they were keeping us alive. This is a different part of the story. We were watching what they had to go through, and it was hot. This was May when we started. We did it all through June and into July, ending up around July seventh. They were responsible for getting us to the location, guarding us while we were there, for meeting security, passing out flyers, managing the crowd. When we couldn’t be there—it was only Amal and I—then it was lieutenants and captains that went around their sectors and districts. I’m talking about knocking on doors, going to stores, stopping people in the streets. This is as basic governance as you can imagine, maybe.

How they got people to a location was another whole story. We didn’t tell them how to do anything. We said, “This is what we need done. We need to have an election by X date. Prior to the election in your neighborhood, we need to have, hopefully, a few hundred people present and, hopefully, 10 or 12 people that want to be candidates.”

Q: You’re telling this to the local population?

DERMER: To the local population and to the army. The army knew how to do it. Another thing that we faced was how the information we were putting out would be understood. You’re talking to a population, first off, that’s Middle Eastern; secondly, it’s Arab in culture, and religion and history. Thirdly, it’s Iraqi with the albatross of Saddam. It was clearly unimaginable to any of us that I met in Iraq how deeply and badly messed up Iraq was prior to our getting there. We knew it was bad. We know the Middle Eastern culture can be tough on its citizens for services, for local governance and representation and hearing their voices. That’s a given, but what Saddam did, Saddam had completely neutered Iraqi society, intellectually and

mentally and spiritually. So we came rolling in there. We always seem to think that as we speak the message is being heard, it's being translated, and you get feedback in order to have a dialog to work out problems. What really happened was that half the things we said, if not more, weren't understood, and half the things we said that were understood, even though they told us they understood them, they didn't. The only thing they could do was revert back to their ways of "Yeah, I want to be elected. I want to be in this process because then I am somebody, and I get better gasoline and I get a better apartment. I will be in the eyes of the power. I get power."

Q: In other words, everybody wanted to be a candidate but didn't understand this election process?

DERMER: Yes; they had no idea of the democratic principle of it. They just wanted to be in line. Some did not want to participate because they were afraid; they were not about to answer for anybody else. You also have to understand that at this time in Iraq, from April maybe into July, even now in a sense, the whole population was traumatized, except for the Kurds. The Kurds are very happy that they now can breathe, but the Iraqi population below Kurdistan didn't know what to think when they woke up in the morning. Here we are rolling out there with energy and words and colored slides saying, "Hey, trust us. This is where we're going to take you. This is what we're going to do. This is what it's all about. We're heading towards democracy." Now, none of us could stand up there and give a Harvard lecture on democracy, especially at the local level. Some of us tried to do as much reading as we could. I am now very interested in how we started, Jefferson and all that kind of stuff, and have done a lot of reading on that since I got back. But we couldn't go real deep into the levels of why this was good for you and why you had to do this. We didn't have all those talking points. We didn't have the time to do that kind of strategy. We just knew the President's vision and we knew how we lived, and we knew where we had to get to according to Bremer, and that's what we tried to do.

So the daily fight was just getting Iraqis to participate. There was a lot of tension. There was a lot of physical stuff. We lost Doctor Farris, who was one of the first Iraqis we recruited, to assassination.

Midway through the process, a group of expatriate Iraqis came in to help us. Again, there was no expert group on local government that had shown up yet, but it was coming. This whole time we thought they were always inbound from USAID or contractors, 12 to 15 personnel per locality or whatever it was going to be. That was all still on the horizon. A group of expatriate Iraqis, some of them military, some not, from all over the world were contracted to come in to help with the rebuilding of Iraq in various fields, in whatever their expertise was at the time. For example, if they were doctors or engineers, they would come to Iraq and work in medicine or engineering. Others were just going to come help political development because they knew Iraqis and they knew people and they knew family and they would work with us.

We started to get these guys in, and each district or each one of us was assigned a couple to help us. I got mine in mid-June, and I took them out to do an election in one of the roughest neighborhoods, an area called Sheik Marouf. People thought that the roughest area was Sadr City. It was not, actually. I went into Sadr City and did that one first. It took about a month total, but everything was layered. I'd start at Sadr, get that rolling, go to another district,

neighborhood, get it rolling, come back to Sadr and see how things were going, and do all that throughout the city of Baghdad, just as Doctor Amal would do

When I went into these neighborhoods, very rarely would I wear a bulletproof vest or be armed, because I wanted to give the picture that I'm not of that sort, I'm not security, I'm here from the CPA, I'm here to build. "Just ease up a bit. I'm here to go to work." That didn't help me. There were some close calls out there, but I decided to stick with that as much as possible. Or I would go with personal protection en route and as soon as I would get to an area I would take it off, whereas the soldiers would never take theirs off. I picked up our Iraqi contractors and they proved to be a big help, but they too were not prepared nor had any idea as to what they were about to face or what we were doing.

For example, we did this neighborhood one day in June sitting in a soccer stadium in direct sun. It's something you don't want to do, you can't do normally, but I had no place else to gather people. We would give them an initial talk, try and get things rolling a little bit, get the soldiers positioned. We never had any prep time. We never had any materials for elections. We never had a place that would be all set up so we could just go to work. Every one was its own adventure. In my journal I kept the nuances of all these. You had to figure out an entry point, an exit point, a security plan; what did you want to use, three-by-five cards, a piece of paper, who had pencils. We didn't have any of these materials in place; we had to bring them.

Q: The actual election is taking place in the soccer stadium?

DERMER. On that day, yes. We spoke in parking lots, lots of markets; we spoke in schools—I never did a mosque, but I did bring imams into the process—firehouses; police stations that were left; bunkers. Sadr City had two underground bunkers built by the Germans. These things were masterpieces of architectural construction, phenomenal, and they were prevented from being looted by Sadr citizens during the war. One or two persons lost their lives guarding the gates. These things actually turned out to be really neat places to meet. They were underground and they were cool. There was one problem: there was no lighting, because the electricity was off and on all the time. So on more than one occasion we'd start the lecture, or the translator would, and the lights would go out. You're underground now, so it's pitch black. On the first occasion that it happened, I thought, oh, great, well, this ends this, but nobody moved, not a single soul moved. This was no big deal to Iraqis. So I said to myself, "Okay, I won't move either." One of the soldiers had a flashlight, and another one went upstairs outside and got a bunch of chemsticks and laid them all around the floor. The picture is: I'm talking, the translator's holding up the PowerPoint slide with a flashlight pointing down on the slide, I had a chemstick on my belt just so they could see my body (they can't see my face), and there are chemsticks around so people don't trip and fall. In the audience are a hundred people, sheikhs, imams, old people, young people, guys that are just seeing what the hell's going on there, that don't care about the elections. I continued, and we would continue for another hour or two talking about what would happen, here's what we want to do, who's interested, here's how it'll work, here's the date we'd like to do it on, does anyone have a place we can do it. Nobody moved; underground in Sadr City, nobody moved. There was nothing more important for them to do. Most were out of work. "Okay, we'll listen to what the guy has to say, this American."

Q: Did you get usable responses from this?

DERMER: Well, the questions and answers were unique. We tried to do three sessions a day, from the time you went out to the street corner, or to wherever you were going to meet, to the time you could break to go to another locale, and by that time two was a lot. After you did two of these a day, just explanation, then later on, if you had an election, by the time we got to elections, you were already spent. To do three, you were more than spent, but sometimes you'd have to go from eight at night 'til midnight to a certain locale. You would never get women at that time, which is another whole issue about trying to get women involved. But you had to just keep going in order to get all of Baghdad informed, because we didn't have mass media. There were no telephones, the radios weren't working, the TVs weren't working, and our own efforts weren't working.

The meetings would start with just a few people in attendance. I once started in a hotel room with four. At the next meeting we'd say, "Okay, when can we meet again?" You know, you're depending on a person, an Iraqi, or two to help you make this happen. You're just meeting these guys as you go. At the next meeting there'd be 15 in the hotel room, so the hotel room would be too small. We'd say, "When can we meet again?" They would say, "We can get you more people on Wednesday," so you come back on Wednesday in the schoolyard and in the schoolyard would be 50. Okay, that's 50—not bad but we've got to have a little bit more to do an election. Then you'd ask the Iraqis who helped you, "When can we get more?" "Well, I can get you some more three days from now." "Okay, where can that be?" "Well, it will have to be over in the junkyard." Okay, we go to the junkyard and show up at the junkyard and there are 150 people. You're just pushing this down the line until you think you can get a semblance of an election for this neighborhood. You think you've got the right mix of people, enough know about it—and they never do. We never did stop taking criticism for everybody not knowing and having a chance.

After the larger meetings we had something called sidebars, in which Iraqis would approach you one by one. In that culture, especially if it was a sheikh or an imam or whatever, you've got to give them a semblance of time. It might be 30 seconds but you've got to look them in the eyes and say, "Okay, what's going on?" Very little of it ever had to do with the process at hand. It always had to do with personal issues: brother killed by Saddam, brother injured in the war, sister missing or kidnapped, brother had been in Iran for 20 years. "How do I get him out?" "When's there going to be electricity?" "We don't have any food, no propane" "I don't have work. Can I get a job?" "Will you pay us to help you?" You had to do that every day all day no matter where you were. As soon as you got out, the crowd would form, and then when they'd find out who's who, which would be us, then the sidebars would begin; and you had to prepare, you had to leave time for these because the culture demanded it and there were some big boys in the audience once in a while.

We were trying to process a system here, and we didn't know the best way; we didn't know if we were going to find a champion; we didn't know if we were going to have a failure; and we didn't know if someone was going to get hurt. That was always the other thing: We would be alone—this is something that I had to do all throughout Iraq because of what I also did in the Ministry of Defense—you'd be alone out there at times with hundreds of very scared,

traumatized, unhappy, hot, uninformed Iraqis, and if anyone had a real ax to grind, we were it, we were the perfect target. At this time we didn't have the mass insurrection, of course, that we have had since. That would come later, and I'd still be doing this. So there was a sense that we had sometimes that where we were it would be okay to go outside and do a bunch of things. I would stand in crowds for an hour or two. I would endure the rocks. The kids in Sadr would always throw rocks at us. They got it from the Palestinians on Al Jazeera. I would endure that because it was important to me to be seen, to be out, to be moving, to be doing something seen by as many Iraqis as possible. With the printed material, it was the same thing; you'd feel bad because you'd have 50 copies and the old sheikh would come up and you had to give him one, and you would try and explain to them, "Okay, share." There was no such thing. Nobody knew how to take one and sit down with five people and read it together. They wouldn't do that. You'd have to give one. You'd promise them you'd bring more next time.

Q: So how many visits did you have to make to a particular neighborhood before you were able to have an election?

DERMER: It depends; it averaged three or four. It all depended upon the aggressiveness of you, the soldier, and the Iraqi counterpart that you found. You'd always have to find one Iraqi in each neighborhood that would at least put out the word, open his door, arrange a place for you to be, or make something happen. If this were in our culture, maybe this guy who was helping wouldn't be interested in being elected; maybe he wouldn't be interested in voting. In that culture, of course, position is everything. Whoever is standing next to me is seen as somebody that has influence and power, to whom others need to be guided. You would have to deal with that whole dynamic as well. For example, without the local Iraqi helper, you couldn't get anything done in X neighborhood, but at the same time, he's probably a guy you may not want anyway. What happened to us initially, especially to the army, was that people would come up and say, "I'll help you," and those weren't necessarily the best of characters. But, number one, at the time it wasn't relevant anyway, because they were in the middle of a shooting war, especially in the military campaign, and you needed to get the mission done. Two, you needed things to happen right away. And if the guy volunteers and makes it happen, you're not at that time wondering if he's been a Baathi, a Saddam regime guy, a war criminal. You don't know, and at that initial moment it's not something that you're worried about. Now, as time goes on, of course, you begin to learn if this guy's a real baddie. He helped us out a lot, he got us this, but he's a bad guy. So now how do I factor this into it? Something we faced at the local levels all throughout Iraq very early on was the tendency that if you were disliked, you were labeled—this happened in World War Two; it happened with the Soviet Union as well—"Baathi, Baathi, Baathi," "Nazi, Nazi, Nazi."

Q: Whether you were or not.

DERMER: Whether you were or not. It was a way of getting them back. This guy starts to get ahead of the pack; he was a hotel owner before; he's a nobody; he never did anything: "Baathi. That's why he's helping you; Baath he is." This is something that just had to be balanced. One of the things that we had to do—Bremer mandated it, but it was also morally and ethically correct—was insure that any of the final candidates at the district level—in the district and the city council for sure—were of as clean a background as we could tell, that we had the means to

find out. They couldn't be senior Baathists, because we already had the de-Baathification order, and we had to make Iraqis sign that statement. Once they got elected to a certain level, they'd have to sign this statement: "I'm not a Baathi; I'm not senior; or, if I was, I'm not senior and I'm now done with it." Well, that in and of itself took hours and hours and hours of explanations and time. Then we also had another piece of paper that mentioned something about not being religious; we didn't care about the candidate's sect. They complained that, "If I sign this, I'm violating my Islamic rights," or something. It had nothing to do with that whatsoever. It wasn't de-Baathification, it was something else, but they saw it as being anti-Islamic. It wasn't; it had nothing to do with Islam. But it took more than one lecture and more than one meeting and 100 hours of face-to-face time to make them believe that you weren't trying to de-Islam them on the way to democracy.

Q: Is this a 'swearing an oath' problem like we have with some...?

DERMER: Once I get my stuff, I'll have to look at that again. It was not necessarily an oath. Actually we thought it was a simple, benign admin procedure we were trying to do, but they turned it when they read it. We had everything translated in Arabic, and nothing could ever be translated just right. It didn't matter who translated the document, it took four different translations. This was a big problem for us, when you're trying to sell concepts that are new to a system.

Q: Do you speak Arabic?

DERMER: I do. I speak enough to get along well. I am not fluent, and I would not want to be held accountable for a diplomatic conversation, but I speak enough to get along, and I learned, of course, every day out there.

Q: I've heard from others that there was a problem because some of the initial translators that were recruited spoke a different kind of Arabic than that spoken in Iraq. Is it your opinion that that made much of a difference, at least in the work you were doing?

DERMER: Yes, sometimes. There would be hesitancy toward any expats. The Iraqis were not into seeing people come back. The Iraqis that came back with us had a lot of problems. It took a lot of strength and personal effort to become one of the gang, become one of them or be trusted by them, more or less, and that's become one of the big trusts for them. The dialect was important. They wanted to hear Iraqi dialect. The Lebanese translator, the Egyptian translator, they weren't their most favorite sons. They could do well after a time; they just weren't the most favored. The Iraqis, I discovered, are very nationalistic. I'm not sure they knew what that meant, but they had this thing about being Iraqi, and we had to face it all the time at the local level,

Q: Okay, now, you've had your meetings, you've gotten a big enough group to have an election, so how did you actually have the election?

DERMER: Very neatly. We would get a hall set up or a place. These things would be packed sometimes and there would be nowhere to move, and it was hot whatever time of day or night it

was. And we decided the time. We discovered very shortly after we started that we'd also have to have a closing time. At first, they were open. First, we would ask for volunteers from among those who were interested. Several days prior to this, as best we could, we would ask for those that were interested in being representatives, and we would get that information from the army or by ourselves as part of our visits out there, or through the Iraqis who'd say, "These guys are interested." We would confirm that information the day of the election: "Are all those people that have said they are interested present?" "Yes." "Okay, is there anyone else that has a burning desire to be a representative?" You'd get a few more, one or two. We'd have to take time to find out who they were, where they're from, what their sect was. We couldn't have an election with 27 Sunnis in a Shia neighborhood.

Q: When you say you had to take time, what are we talking about here, days or hours?

DERMER: It depends. If we had the time before, we'd do it before, but if two or three people would show up at that meeting and say they wanted to be candidates, we had to point-blank ask where they're from and give them a few questionnaires. Then we did something very unique which was unheard of in this culture. We had them introduce themselves. We would literally have them face the crowd, face the music, and introduce themselves and say a few things. "Why is it you want to be an elected representative in this new system?" They'd never done this before, ever, nor had they seen it. For me it was emotional to watch.

We had to keep in mind the whole time that everything we did in Baghdad was essentially something we were doing in the Middle East, not just Iraq. I personally feel very few other people ever understood this; in Garner's group I know Jay Garner did; I'm not sure many other people did. It was important to understand that, because we had to use that in our talking points with Iraqis as a means of getting them excited about what they were participating in, what they were doing. They were leading a change in not only Iraq but the Middle East. You have this hangover, an anchoring, the old nationalism hangover. Well, okay, here's a way to pick it up. True strength is not about armies. We'd have to go into lectures about how armies only tend to divide. Our family doesn't even know what my uniform means. This is unheard of in Iraq. It's not important that your military wins at the end of the day; it's important that your electoral process and the rule of law are established, and you are participating in that process, which is the first of its kind in the Middle East. This wasn't exactly historical truth, but for the premises that we worked, yes. It would change the mold of things sometimes. Sometimes it would get you in trouble, but it would add to the nature of what you were doing. It was important, we felt, that we said these things and we understood the nature of what we were trying to attempt.

They would come up and they'd introduce themselves, and it would just be something to watch these Iraqis doing it, especially a woman, because one of the charters, the sub-implied charter of our efforts, was to get women involved and make sure the minorities were involved, whoever we could find, and make sure we had balance the best we could. That was going to be tough at the end of the day. Never mind the fact you're trying to get enough people to come to an election. We also had a checklist of 25 other items, none of which were small things; any one of which could completely cause you to fail, but this had to be accounted for today. Okay, so they introduced themselves. Now, clearly we could see that life was not Western here and blocs had been created. Imams had dictated who would be voted for. Sheiks would say, "Okay, this will

be voted for,” and there was pre-voting done. It was really neat to see that a lot of people couldn’t read or write; I don’t say “neat” in a way that it was neat that they couldn’t read or write, but they would walk up with a partner and tell them whom they wanted voted for. Soldiers would say, “Hey, you can’t do that.” “Easy, easy,” we’d say. “Do not get stuck on the proprieties here. The issue here is not propriety; it’s just get through this process tonight. It’s not going to be clean, it’s not going to be validated. In, out, no one gets hurt,”—which were just things we had to manage very carefully at times. “Let’s get the voters, let’s tally, and in a few days we will get back to them with the results. That’s the mission here. If a guy wants to write a name twice and we catch him, okay, pull the slip, not him. If he wants to try and get back in line, ‘Good try, Ahmad. Go home.’” We missed all those things at first. We had to watch this. They were very smart as to how they were playing us, and we would have to set up another guard at the back—“You can’t come in”—and later on we’d have to quarantine. The Iraqis wouldn’t want to leave. They would never leave until they knew. Crowds would come in that end of the exit hall and they’d come in the entrance hall. We’d lose control of some of these things, or start to, so each time we’d have to figure out new rules.

That was the good thing about Amal and me, because we were seeing all the different elections, as many as we could, and then we would be able to go to another sector in Baghdad and say, “Here are some things you guys need to be aware of, need to watch.” We got to the point of no codification but just figuring it out. At the end of the voting, we would have our list. We would know what who was elected, from what strata of society, what they were. We wanted professionals if we could get them. We tried to get some military guys. At the end of the day we got one or two generals, I think. We just wanted to balance things out. We were so idealistic it was sickening. Our only goal really was to instill the right seed in a few people, that they would pick up on later, and I don’t know when later is. We’d go through the election and we’d have to do one or two hours of sidebars to get out of there, literally to the point you had to peel people off of you, and you’d be drenched.

Q: You mentioned before that people came up and asked for help with personal problems. So what could you tell them, and what could you do for them?

DERMER: That was a heartbreaker; that hurt. Again, Saddam Hussein literally destroyed the society. He left nothing, and he was brilliant, left nothing and gave nothing. You would learn, in my opinion, that nothing was real in Iraq. The only thing in Iraq you really had to do was wake up and come home, and it was a great day. Even the buildings that we all lived in. The palaces were beautiful, esthetic, but if you go beyond a certain level, they weren’t that well built, they would fall apart. That said, we had 3,000 in the CPA Republican Palace that was only meant for several hundred at a time. We had thousands there daily. But the buildings were falling apart, they were cracking, all the systems in Baghdad. There were no sewage systems. Electricity was a mess. We had a lot of problems with the appearance of electricity when we got into Iraq because Saddam maneuvered it. He maneuvered everything: give a city, take a city, give a city, take a city. He was brilliant in how he played the entire population. He knew Arabs. He knew himself.

We had several things we could do for the people with problems. First off, if it was something within our purview, we would actually try and work it. That’s what Americans do, or any

Coalition fellows who were with us. In a team of four, with three or four back in the palace, we did what we could do. Secondly, the army, God bless them, those guys would try to take it on. Now, things like “My brother’s in Iran” were beyond us. Lastly, what you would do was say, “Okay, I hear you,” you would take a few notes, and then you would do nothing. That was hard. You wanted to do as much as you could, but the vastness of the things you were approached with was too great. This was something that all of us in the CPA who went out of the Green Zone to do our jobs found was the hardest part of our day, trying to figure out, “Okay, I got my issues to work and they’re more than I can handle. I cannot handle what I’m chartered to do”—that was a given from the day when we landed in Iraq—“but now I know these 10 other things are going to come up today, and I can’t do anything about them.” If I’m a human rights person looking at mass graves, what am I to say about the woman who’s looking for a husband who’s an Iranian prisoner of war? All I can do is come back and tell somebody, but by the way, she’s one of 10,000. It would hurt us because the Iraqis would soon get enough people with the same problem and say, “You’re not doing anything about this problem,” or one of the people I hired for the Ministry of Defense later on would say, “My husband’s brother was killed by a soldier accidentally in a raid, and we’ve heard nothing since.” Well, I don’t know what unit or when. It would be really hard, almost to the point where you would have to figure a way not to get into those, the best you could, and that was hard. Because when they saw you, if you were CPA, you were Bremer as far as they were concerned, and that’s a cultural thing, or you were of Bremer. I would get stuck with talking to large groups at times. I would come to an area having no intent of speaking or being a spokesperson, but when 200 sheiks are at a gathering for whatever reason, for an election or when I did the recruiting for the Ministry, and you show up, you cannot say nothing. You have to announce yourself. They want to hear from you, and then you’ve got to stand by while all 200 walk by and have issues with you. Classic, I guess. It’s what a lot of famous people do. You have to find a way to get in and get out and, “I’ll be back as soon as I can in the next couple of days,” and, of course, you don’t show up. It was hard.

Q: Okay, now you have the elections, and then what happened?

DERMER: You have the elections. Then you start building a database as to who’s going to be at what level and what position. Sometimes we had to do some adjustments, some corrections, but what ended up really happening was our numbers started to grow, our numbers started to permutate. Our 27 didn’t remain 27 for the city council, plus or minus 27. Our district numbers did not remain; our neighborhood numbers did not remain. Just by not having a system that was fully monitored, fully developed, fully implementable, and in an environment that was inhospitable and dangerous, non-permissive, we ended up having to work it as we went. One neighborhood got two more; one got one less. The city council got too big, in my eyes. It got close to 35, between 35 and 40, at the end of the day, and we didn’t want that because with any Middle Eastern group, I would argue, Israelis too, you’re not going to get anywhere to get things done if the deliberating body is too large.

So we had to now get in the game of just completely starting to mix and match neighborhoods, match and mix districts en route to get a city council that was, again, as balanced, as representative as possible. Now, who? Balanced and representative to us? Well, yeah, in one sense, but not to Iraqis, and this was the hard part, because no matter what we did, we knew Iraqis weren’t going to be satisfied. There were Iraqis that didn’t want to see women on it.

There were Iraqis that were going to say, “If you have 13 Shia and nine Sunni”—which I think we had, a little more Shia than Sunni—“it’s not fair,” no matter what we did. And half the city didn’t know about it, I think, at the end of the day either. Maybe a good fourth of Baghdad never knew about the process, maybe more. Once they heard about it, they’d say, “What do you mean we have a city council? Oh, lackeys appointed by the government,” just like they called the Governing Council later on. “Oh, that’s nothing. It’s a joke. It’s a farce.” We knew we were going to face this, and we had people who came up to us and said, “I’m not represented.” “Okay, where do you live?” “I live in X neighborhood.” “Yeah, you are. This is your neighborhood representative.” “Yeah but my neighborhood is not represented.” “I know that, but these representatives are responsible for the entire boundary or this border.” “But my neighborhood’s not represented, so it’s a false process.” “Okay. Yes, sir.” And this is times 1,000 every day.

We finally came in with final numbers on where we’d have the city council, did the vetting as best we could: who’s who; where are they from, the best way to do vetting at that time: We did have some records and some databases, of course. We knew who would have been a high-level Baathi, by virtue of where he worked, and we had to go through all that. Most Iraqis said they never were Baath. Almost every teacher was; even elementary teachers had to be in the Baath Party; professors had to be. Anyone that worked in the Atomic Energy Commission, even if they were a computer programmer and 25 years old, had to be. Of course, they all said they weren’t, and we had to get all that straight. What we were afraid of at the end of the day and had to be careful of was that Ambassador Bremer was going to open this first meeting of the Baghdad City Council, the first of its kind in the Middle East, and, of course, the TV would show him and the delegates, and then somebody in Iraq would say, “Oh, my God, that participant was the top person in X part of the regime,” or whatever, and then, of course, it would have been international.

Q: So how did you vet these people?

DERMER: Just like I said. First off, most of the process was self-vetting. Anybody of the sort that would have been really bad was either gone and hiding, would know better than to come out in public. The mid-level guys were the ones who might give it a chance, but the big guys wouldn’t. So there was a lot of self-vetting going on. We got through the point of people yelling, “He’s a Baathi, Baathi, Baathi,” when they were just angry with him or trying to not let him win favor. We did have our own records as well for certain things, and at the end of the day we did our own investigation as best we could. We would ask Iraqis. We’d go out to Iraqis and do the best we could. Those three or four things, hopefully, produced the right people. Also, we had a lot of people who would stick with us, and it was dangerous to stick with us, dangerous to be in elections, and they’ve been killed in Iraq since last year. Assassins have been taking them out all the time. I’ve forgotten how many we’ve lost. Sadr City lost three, two. It was dangerous, so none of those guys, no big apparatchik, was going to have any guts or sense to stand up to that kind of a process. And I think the best we could do worked. At the end of the day did we do a little readjusting? Yes, but not in regard to anyone who would be rejected altogether. And finally it worked. It was gratifying. July 7th we had the Council, we opened it. International news media were there, Bremer was there, and it was a big day. We were all not in

tears but we were all pretty emotional. If we were in tears, it would have been for the sake of what could happen, not what had happened.

Q: What have these councils been able to actually do since they were elected?

DERMER: I had to leave Iraq right after the Council was formed. What we did was beyond hard. It was unimaginable. We were drained. We had nothing left. But then, with the formation of the local governments, in a sense the hard work really began. Because now we had to formally make these things work. By the way, we still did not have the contractors. The army got very mad at us.

Q: And this is when?

DERMER: July. The army was mad. By this time we thought we would have 45 professional advisors in Baghdad and 12 to 15 in each governate. Now, the governance system still wasn't working. We still hadn't come up with a plan for the governates. I was trying to do that on the side. I was arguing vehemently in the governance group that I originally went to Iraq with. They were primarily focused on building the Governing Council, going out all over Iraq to search for talent. That's a whole different story, of who searched for whom and who deemed whom was talent. We were on a different level.

I was arguing that "While you guys are doing this, we've got to get something out to all of Iraq. We'll have the national and we'll have Baghdad, and then we'll do like Kabul or other areas," and we just couldn't get there. We thought we'd have 45 advisors for Baghdad. There weren't; it didn't happen. So the army then got stuck, because the army thought that the day after elections they were going to be out of it. They did the labor, they did the grunt work, they took the heat and the shootings and whatever, keeping us alive and getting us around and talking democracy on some street corner. They thought they were done. It's the second time. First, they thought once the war was done they wouldn't be in this business of nation building. And then, "Okay, never mind. We are going to help with this stuff. We'll do that, but then you've got these pros coming in, right? Baseball hats and beards and professors." We said yes, because that's what we planned.

By this time we had the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] coming to the fore, some big ones and some small ones. We planned a big conference to get all the delegates and the NGOs together so they could start to overlap. Of course, we had the classic dilemma of who would manage the NGOs, and there was nothing to keep them from going into one neighborhood or another. We had all these things to deal with while we were doing the elections, the greater strategic picture. But if we didn't have the NGOs, there wasn't anybody. The contractors just weren't coming. Only a few were willing to come, mainly because of the security situation, and also because of the problems of getting these people contracted. It was massive. We had a female come in that worked with us. She was an Iraqi expat. She had two really bad nights with us, in two different neighborhoods. I had to prevent her from being physically harmed twice, and this is who came in to help. She specifically came in to work women's issues post-elections. It was a massive issue for just one person in Baghdad.

So we had to try and develop a plan for the army to do this, and this is where Joe Rice, the lieutenant colonel reservist, came in with his expertise in the handbooks and stuff that he wrote, which are just phenomenal. He started to manage and work with them there, but I didn't know what to tell him. These guys said, "Okay, so you said we'd be done. Okay, so the neighborhood council met today. What do we do?" Well, what do you do, especially if you've got the army there and you've got fighting going on and you don't have any real executive authority, and they probably wouldn't get it except for the city council level? They were proceeding step by step, which is what they're still doing today. They got a few professionals in. They tried to work it where the councils would manage and make decisions and then we would find ways to help execute those decisions.

Realistically, you've still got the issues of the Middle East culture. Those weren't easy things to get over. We had a lot of internal problems, a lot of internal politics. Which council is successful and which one isn't all depends upon the leadership in the council, which is a whole different dynamic defined in Iraq, and the war right now is causing us a big problem. The Sadr Council doesn't meet, of course, and hasn't met in Sadr City for months. It had to meet somewhere outside of Sadr City. The City Council would be held in abeyance a few times, but it's still meeting through it, and maybe, if nothing else, that's still okay at this juncture. We don't know. Our strategic guide, Andy, is still out there and says they're still working. But there are varying degrees of success.

And we lost people. People would come, people would go. Then we eventually also started to pay them. We started to pay them 100-some dollars a month, depending upon the level, as an enticement, plus it's a dangerous environment. We were against it, two of us were against it, and others were for it and actually started to pay them. We were against it because we thought if they stuck through this mess and didn't get paid for it, we could find a real champion. Okay, maybe at the end of the day if they're getting paid and they stick through this, we'll find a champion, because that's what we really need to make this work, a couple of Iraqi champions to make it really stick, and we will see.

Q: Now, there will be elections eventually in Iraq.

DERMER: That's the intent.

Q: Is there somebody now who's taking this experience that you had and assisting the Iraqi interim government to overcome the problems?

DERMER: I don't know. This is the first time I've ever had a chance to even go into any of this in depth in a year. I've never spoken about this until today, never.

Q: Just looking at your experience with this, setting up the local governate councils, what do you consider your greatest success and what do you consider the biggest failure in this thing?

DERMER: The greatest success is we found people, I believe, that really 'get it.' They get it, "it" being where we wanted to take them, what we were espousing to them, what we wanted them to do. They literally get it.

Q: As candidates, you mean?

DERMER: As candidates, as some local leadership people, as some people that helped us get those things going. Even if one of our Iraqis who could do something, make anything happen in the area, didn't want to be elected, would support us and didn't try and preempt the system or preempt what we were doing, that's a good sign. There are Iraqis that I believe really want this to happen. It doesn't have to be a lot. I think we got to them, we have them now. It's probably a handful, I believe. That's our great success. Getting the elections done and all that, I think, is actually second to getting some people out and about, and they haven't quit in the face of there being assassinations, in the face of the difficulties, in the face of not having any real authority, real power, but they haven't quit. I see that as probably the best thing we did.

The biggest failure of ours is twofold. First off, we didn't have a strategic plan, which wasn't a shortcoming of any of us; it was a shortcoming of the collective planning in our war effort, pre-war effort. There wasn't any. We went out to Baghdad and said, "How do you want to do this?" Secondly, en route to that we didn't have time to do it as right as we would have liked to do it. Everything had to be done tomorrow, and there weren't any assets allocated. We had to make it up. There weren't vehicles, there wasn't security, there wasn't, like I said, information. We didn't have any of these things that the Republican and Democratic campaigns have, such as banners. We didn't have anything. We were scratching it out. Because of that then, really what we were doing was a very, very, very important effort. This was nothing that you could take lightly or you wanted to do in an elementary way. If we failed, it was catastrophic. And we didn't set ourselves up for success. If it is successful, we'll tell the stories later, but we didn't really have a chance to really do it like we should have done it, even though we did manage to pull it off.

Q: For the last nine months that you were in Iraq you worked with the team that was setting up a department of defense. Can you tell me what your particular role was in this?

DERMER: Well, when I came back to Iraq in the fall after a short break in the States, I was assigned to what was called the Defense Institution Development. Really what it was meant to do was set up things, the Ministry of Defense, possibly other national security organizations. At that time it was against policy to form a formal Ministry of Defense in Iraq or an intelligence directorate or intelligence system or whatever you want to call it. That was because original guidance from the CPA was that the Iraqis would form this ministry. While all other ministries would be allowed to rebuild from the start of the Coalition Provisional Authority or ORHA, the Ministry of Defense would be up to the Iraqis after elections and after the constitution was adopted. That was the original strategic thinking or framework. In hindsight, it was the wrong decision, but nevertheless we formally started building the new ministry in November. Prior to us actually building the ministry, a small group had done work on what was called the DSA, Defense Support Agency. This was necessary because the Iraqi army was being built, regardless of whether there was a Ministry of Defense or not.

So here you can see one of the inherent shortcomings. In order to build the army, you had to build a logistical base, and that logistical base was going to be called the Defense Support

Agency, the concept being it would be civilian fixed bases of support for the Iraqi Army. This would keep the Iraqi Army from being outwardly mobile and of an offensive nature. It would make it more defensive, tied to the civilian community, tied to the civilian population, intermixed military and civilian in the new Iraq, and other philosophies. Work had been ongoing on that for several months, good work, so in essence we were starting inside out. We had a Defense Support Agency being built, bases being rebuilt in Iraq, refurbished, a logistics system for the army being established, but that was it in terms of defense. Nothing else, not even a system, not even an organization chart, had been created for the Ministry of Defense.

As political things started to change in Iraq, it became clear that the CPA's lifetime would be shortened outside this original strategic plan. We didn't know how long we were going to be in Iraq. It was going to be at least several years for elections and things like writing the constitution and development of political processes. It became apparent that if the CPA was going to leave, prior to departure it really should start the establishment of a new Ministry of Defense as well. So this meant that, while all the other ministries had been essentially trying to be reworked or rebuilt since April, we would now have to start on the Ministry of Defense in November. But we would have to be at the same point as the other ministries by June.

While at the senior level they were fighting about whether there could be a Ministry of Defense, what it should be called and how it should be organized and what it should look like, a couple of us had gotten together in the office and decided not to wait for the official guidance or the word to come down to do this. We had already said to ourselves, "Look, regardless of when and where there will be a ministry, at least in the interim we can do some thought and some drawings and some organizational concepts. We have got to get this off the ground." I was surprised when I came out there in September that nothing had been done about this. All work had been done through the Defense Support Agency, great work by only three or four people. That's all that was there, but they went all the way down to line items and desks and sizes of bases and chairs. That's how intent they were, but nothing above it or beyond it, no policy, no strategy, no personnel, no administration, no operations, anything. So one day an Estonian, an Australian and I decided to take the initiative, and we brought in a white board and markers, and the three of us printed out the research about every Western-style ministry of defense we could find. We printed out the NATO structure and the EU structure, I think, and several other structures of organizations around the world today. We studied those for a couple days, and then we got to drawing on the white board the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, and that's literally how it started, and that was in November.

If you can imagine the dynamics of the Estonian, who had been the National Security Advisor in his own country through the transition from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the new Estonia, new Balkans; the Australian gentleman, who had been a policy person at the defense level in Australia, a good guy, a young guy; and myself. It took us a couple of days to do the basic structure that you would see in the opening webpage of any defense-level department, Secretary Rumsfeld down to Wolfowitz and over to Feith and all the under secretaries, just the start, just the basic building blocks, eight of them across under the Secretary. We had to argue over terms, because we had the Commonwealth system, we had our system, and we had all the other systems of the world. We had to determine what we'd call these guys, so we basically had boxes with the levels in there. We went across: policy, strategy, international; we put intelligence in there,

which proved to be problematic for a while. We said if we're going to build a ministry, we have to have an intelligence system in Iraq, one to encapsulate all the other intel systems that were developing tactically. For the next few days we argued and bantered and flipped and flopped and compromised and came up with a basic structure, a very simple eight-block chart, and purposely kept it very simple, because we said to ourselves, "Number one, who knows what the best structure is. We have Commonwealth working with U.S. working with European working with other Coalition personnel." We also had a Czech person and a Romanian official in the office, and we let them have their turn at it. So we said, "Let's keep it simple," because nobody knew the Iraqis, number one; number two, translating the stuff into Arabic is something you always have to consider. Our terms might not translate to their terms and, since it was all new anyway, we didn't know what this was going to mean to an Iraqi. So the simpler we could keep it, the better. That's the philosophy we worked out.

Q: Did you consider at all using parts of the structure that had existed in the old Iraqi Ministry of Defense?

DERMER: Absolutely, and that was absolutely not started. The reason was there was no such thing as a true Ministry of Defense previously in Iraq. There was a ministry, but it was entirely military. The apparatus of Saddam and his organization was a military-oriented Ministry of Defense, and we did manage to get an outline from some Iraqi generals. It was as if you were looking at our Joint Staff. That was their Ministry of Defense. Saddam was at the head and then there were military leaders in every possible direction. Very few, if any, civilians were working in it, except in the Military Industrial Commission, which was a big research test-and-development outfit, and some other positions, but it was a military-oriented society and structure. So we had to insert this new civilian-controlled, civilian-oriented, civilian-run bureaucratic Ministry of Defense system, which was totally new for them. Now, whether they understood that concept, or even whether they understand it today, is questionable, but, of course, this was November and we said, "We've got to get on the ball. Nothing's happening. Let's do it."

We then went down to the next level. We had the Rumsfeld level, the Wolfowitz deputy level which we called the Secretary General, as the Commonwealth would call it, which would be a senior bureaucrat, with the intent that he would not be political at that level. So that high-level position would be a bureaucrat, and he would come from within and below and not be subject to political pressures from above or whatever would happen. This was our thinking there. Then we went to the under secretary level, the Doug Feith level. Then we decided to take it one level further and we'd call it quits, the assistant secretary of defense level, deputy assistant secretary in the States, and say, "Okay from that point on, we'll do a little definition but we'll leave it at that, because then we're going to let the Iraqis at least digest this simple senior structure," which was what we wanted to build. Let them build the lower bureaucracy, let them build the other offices, let it mold and let it form and reform and meld into whatever they decided to do. If we go too deep, one, it's too hard to know exactly how deep to go. Two, it would be too complicated for them to flip through the 18, 15, whatever number of charts it would take. Three, we had to define these positions. We had to draw up job descriptions for them, we had to draw up pay scales for them, we had to draw up training for them, so we decided to stick to the senior level, find those people, train those people in the time we had, define those positions and then try and get those positions working in some kind of daily ministry work ethic, all this by June. So if you

back up from June, we needed to start getting people trained yesterday. We got it done, our basic, small group.

A few other Coalition people started coming into the office. Celeste Ward was one; she came in a little bit later. The Brits came in, some senior British guys. And, of course, everybody wanted to take a shot at the chart; they all wanted to get involved in the chart. The end story is it became too complicated. It became very Americanized and Britishized. You had some very, very brilliant people take a look at these charts, and that was the early hiccup or downfall of the development of the ministry, because they wanted to make dotted lines out to the side and subdivisions within a division, which in a Western system would probably work. We could probably take this to Norway or to Germany or France and say, "This is the system we're building for you today. You'll probably be able to work this out." In Iraq, no.

Q: Why not?

DERMER: Too complicated. We had to remain simple to begin with. If it got complicated or got hard, then they would go back to the old way of thinking, if they had been in the military before, or they would default. We needed them to get a grasp of the basic concepts early, just like in building the City Councils. So the original Gang of Three said, "Roger, out. Let some other guys have it," because we had to move on to other things. Primarily, I had to draw up a recruiting plan. We still didn't have any direction yet. We just had started this on our own. We thought to ourselves, great, we had this initial structure, and now some other folks in the office have started to play with it.

At the same time, we still did not have a structure for the joint force headquarters which we were going to develop or for the senior army services either. We had been building the army from the bottom up, and we'd been building defense from inside out, with the logistics component and the bases in the middle. But we didn't have any command and control structures whatsoever. Again, according to the original policy, initially the Coalition wasn't going to do the joint force headquarters either. We were going to let that be developed later by the Iraqis, probably together with the ministry. So, our team that designed the ministry went to the US Army guys and said, "Hey, we're going to have a joint force headquarters because they have to mesh and they have to work together." At the end of the day, civilians control the military. So concurrently then the guys working on building the army started doing a joint force headquarters, and we would sit down together at the end of the day and start mishing and mashing structures. We didn't want a lot of overlap; we didn't want a lot of redundancy.

There were some cultural things there about: you're building a defense support system with civilian control, but should all of it remain in civilian control with fixed bases? Shouldn't the military have a certain amount of logistics control? What level of operations is needed at defense? Do we want to get into the Western system where tactical-level things are coming into senior levels very quickly now through the age of modern communications, or should we keep operations at the military level? These kinds of discussions were going on, hundreds of philosophical discussions under each responsibility. Admin, for example: should Defense do all the hiring and firing of senior people, or should each service have its administrative structure, or should the joint headquarters do all administrative structures for the service in order to keep the

service a war-fighting organization so it doesn't become overburdened and heavy like, let's say, the United States has? Or should it be more like Australia or Britain, which are smaller, more expeditionary, quicker, more compact? Since it was a Coalition force building these structures, we had to go through all these arguments.

Q: Were there any Iraqis at all included in this conversation?

DERMER: No. We argued that there weren't any Iraqis that could do this anyway. It would have been nice to have them sooner. There was someone that was knocking on the door all the time, little angels on each side of our heads going, "Hey, are you going to get Iraqis involved?" and on the other side saying, "Not yet, not now." For our part we got them much earlier. The military involved Iraqis in this kind of planning way too late,. But, first off, the Iraqis had never had any experience at this level. Many Iraqi officers had been trained at Sandhurst, and in India and Pakistan in the '60s and '70s, and then the foreign training had stopped. Saddam had stopped it, but there had been Iraqis that had been out of Iraq and into other systems. Could they translate that experience into any kind of coherent strategic planning? Our answer ended up being, "no." We found throughout Iraq, from A to Z, there was very little concept of strategy. Maybe one or two understood the idea. There was no strategic planning ever done by anybody. There was no strategic thinking ever done. There was no strategy developed. It was Saddam sitting at the head of the war council table and Republican Guard commanders, the Baath Party, the Fedayeen], whoever. That's how it was dictated. There weren't staff papers done, there weren't studies conducted, there weren't visits conducted. There was no such thing in Iraq. So for strategic development in Iraq we really didn't have anyone to turn to. Once we got down to the operational level, there were a few people with experience, and at the tactical level, shooting and driving, we could get input from those guys. But still, that said, we didn't even think about getting them involved until too late, regardless of their capabilities, especially on the military side. Even when I left Iraq in June or July, there still weren't enough Iraqis in their planning shops as there should have been. Big mistake.

Anyway, so we started developing the two major headquarters, and then we asked, "What's the key to success here?" We felt the key to success at the end of the day was people, good, bad, or indifferent. No matter what chart we developed, no matter what we called it, it's the people that count. Fine, sounds good. How do you do it? This is Iraq, and those of us who had been in country for as long as I had at this time and had already done something, knew what we were up against. So the thesis was, we need people, we have to find them; and then, number two, we've got to train them; and number three, the pool's going to be very small. Just like in the local Councils, at the end of the day we were looking for one or two people to lead.

So I wrote up a briefing, called the Outreach Program. I had gotten the idea from the work that they did on the governance group to define the Governing Council. They went out all over Iraq. They had people recommended to them by CPA and ORHA contacts, and they met people, and they had Iraqi expats who said, "Go see this guy," and they went out. It was kind of ad hoc. There were a lot of young people. We polished it up. We made it more finite, and it was going to be done by, of course, those of us who had military leadership and civilian leadership and senior experience. We thought we could do better than the Governing Council. At the end of the day, I don't know if we did or didn't, but that's what we thought when we developed the

concept. The concept was to go out to the governates. A group of us were going to go all over Iraq, to find people and to conduct interviews. You'd have to go out and tell people what you were doing in Iraq, what you wanted. Because at the end of the day the most sensitive ministerial development in Iraq was going to be the Ministry of Defense, bar none, which is another reason we should have started it much earlier. Of course, coupled with this was intelligence. These were the two things in any dictatorship, or single hierarchy government, that were the keys. And it proved to be true by the emotion that we saw when we out in Iraq, when we were getting ready to do this. We already had riots since the beginning of the CPA about soldiers not getting paid and about dismantling the army, so that was already out there. The street was a very uneven street. And here we were going go out in Iraq and saying, "Now, we're going to rehire and start bringing people back in, and we're looking for a few good men, and these are the qualifications." When you were looking for ten, 1,000 would show up.

So we're going to find people and will need to train them, but what do we need to train them in? Well, we don't need to train them as much as we need to educate them, and what do we need to educate them in? We need to educate them in the concepts of a military under civilian control, a military in a democratic society, a representative society, complicated government systems, democratic governments, governments that are under an international framework, the United Nations, just senior-level executive stuff. Well, great, that will take how long? Who knows, a year, year and a half, two? Well, we're probably going to get them training lasting maybe a few weeks at most, per person or per group or per whatever. Now, where are we going to do this? Don't know. Where do we want to go? Research told us that we should go to both military institutions, Carlisle, the War College, Air War College, maybe NATO, maybe the Marshall Center in Europe, and civilian institutions as well. The Senior Advisor for the Minister of Interior said, "Go civilian. Take the military guys to civilian institutions, Harvard, Boston, wherever. Get them to those institutions. It's a better framework." We surmised that for sure training had to be done out of Iraq. There was the argument, "If we need more time, it should be done in Iraq." But we believed that if the Iraqis were really to start afresh we had to get them out of Iraq. We were probably going to go to the United States but, wherever, someplace European, someplace Western. TDY, based on our per-diem rates, and the money's good. So they're out of Iraq, they see a new system, and they get this educational concept that we were going to lay out. Well, time was a problem. We couldn't get them six months. We figured since we're rushed now, it's November, December, and we still haven't had anyone tell us officially to build a ministry of defense. If we wait to get told, we'll never get this thing built. So how much time do we have? Again, if you back up from June and say in July we'd have to be out of the country per se and we probably would want to have the ministry up and running by early June maybe, maybe end of May, four to six weeks. We did these strategic timeline charts with PowerPoint, diamonds and stars and dates and months across the top. Okay, so it has to be up by 1 June; that means recruiting has to be finished by 1 May, or schooling has to be done somewhere between May and June, which means your recruiting has to be finished no later than 1 May, with selection possibly in April for the seniors, and we've got to have a few low-level positions in there as well. Okay, April, and it's already December now, which means by March, in January, February and March you have to do your traveling and you're bringing these recruits in. We didn't know how many. How many do you have to have? Well, let's see, we need a 75-person senior staff by July. Again, you back it up to June. We've got to have the last selectees then, so that means, if you space it out over three or four months, January, February, March,

you've got to do 25 apiece, senior guys, and we're looking for the cream of the crop, with schooling in between.

You could see already now that we were working in deficit, and there was no administrative help. How were we going to get these guys to the States? Who was going to pay? How about the budget? There was a budget submission required by the CPA for all ministries. We weren't a ministry yet, but the group that was working on the Defense Support Agency had to have a budget for that. I got a line in their budget for education of 2.6 million, I think it was, which we would later use for our budget for training the senior leader outreach. This was lucky timing, and I got it in. The proposal I put in turned out to be complete crap, didn't make any sense, but I got months and schools and dates and looked up TDY rates and multiplied it by three times, travel costs, and that's just literally what I put in. I didn't really know where they were going to go, but I picked somewhere in America that was expensive and somewhere in Germany. And that's what we used. We ended up having that money available for us.

The most important thing then is the people. So how do we do this? Well, we have an ongoing internal conflict now that's really getting ugly. Now it's downright dangerous to go outside the Green Zone, specifically to certain places in Iraq. Well, we had to publicize this in some way. What we could not do is mass media publication. We would have throngs at the gates. We couldn't handle masses. One, it was dangerous. Two, we couldn't get them in the Green Zone. Three, we didn't have the personnel. It was me and three or four others: Celeste Ward, Eric from Estonia, who wasn't quite involved yet beyond the drawing because he was going to do intelligence later, and we still weren't officially allowed to tackle that one. It was three or four people.

How do we find these recruits? Well, we asked the guys working on the army. First off, what I saw starting to happen was that each of the military units, separate commands, was starting to look for people in their own right, to start forming what was called the ICDC (Iraqi Civil Defense Corps), which is now the Iraqi National Guard. Based upon the security situation that wasn't getting better, we kept delving down into the tactical-level issues rather than strategic. How do we get the personnel to do the violent stuff? Well, let's build a civil defense force, since the police aren't up, the police aren't out, and the army's too small and the army's not doing it.

So army commanders started recruiting ICDC commanders. I said to myself, well, we've got to be careful here because there's no doubt in my mind that within all of Iraq there's probably X number of leaders, and we certainly don't need competition among Coalition agencies looking for the top senior people. That would happen later again when UN rep Brahimi would come in to find new leadership for all the ministries. There aren't that many good guys in Iraq that "get it." Really what we were looking for was people that get what's going on. Never mind their qualifications, their experience, their ranks, because Saddam's army was a fake army. So we couldn't even take generals at face value or colonels at face value because it wasn't real. Their education system wasn't real, their training wasn't real, their life wasn't real, so a general in their army didn't necessarily pass the muster to be at the same level of responsibility in the new military we were forming; nor did a colonel or a bureaucrat.

So I drew up a chart that said, “Let’s find leadership, and then, once found, we will determine where they best fit, Ministry of Defense, Joint Staff Headquarters, ICDC, wherever, trainer, war college, academy, basic school for whatever. It was heady philosophical concept. It didn’t work that way in the end, but everyone agreed it was the way to go. No position was really more important than any other, Joint Headquarters, Ministry of Defense, ICDC. None was philosophically more important than the other. The other problem was, since there was no Ministry of Defense in Iraq before, there was no civilian bureaucratic community to go to. You could do that for housing and construction, you could for education, you could for planning, you could for environment, because they had PhDs, they had doctors, they had scientists in Iraq, not a badly educated community. But in terms of Ministry of Defense there were only former generals or Baath Party members or Saddam family, Tikriti, tribal members. So where do you go? Well, there was no place to go. You can go to the general officer community, which we would do, of course, and to the retired community looking for some elders, but we also then, in terms of competition or terms of philosophy, have to go to the civilian community. But to what civilian community do you go to build a Ministry of Defense. We’ve got academia, I guess, an academia that was trained under Saddam. We can go to engineers, we can go to administrators. That’s what we’ll have to do. We’ll have to also go out into the civilian community, just like everyone else is doing, looking for leadership, and see if some of those guys want to come to the Ministry of Defense.

As I said, Defense is the most sensitive ministry, with a lot of baggage associated with it, a lot of fear. By the way, we were ahead of ourselves in one sense. We had an organization chart, we now had a plan on outreach, a kind of training/education quick plan, and then a plan to train people. Once we got them back from the States, we’d put them in a little training group that we developed with people like Celeste, who excelled there, literally just simple things like computers. No one in Iraq knew how to work computers, period. Maybe 10 people in the Computer Science Department in Baghdad did, but outside of that, nobody. People did not understand how big a deal this was, and when we developed our training plans they gave them one day of computer training. I said, “One day? You need five or 10.” “Oh, we’ve got to give them democracy, we’ve got to give them....” “Whatever, but I’m telling you right now, all that’s irrelevant. At the end of the day they’re still going to take handwritten memos down the hallway in this new system.” Anyway, we battled back and forth about that.

So where do we go? The US Army finally came to me and said, “We can’t help you. We will give you the nomination. You will be the recruiter for the Ministry of Defense, senior military, and the Joint Force Headquarters.” I had the Middle Eastern experience, and they didn’t have anybody with Middle East experience on the army training team. I could get out. I had the contacts on the Baghdad City Council and with other Iraqis, and I knew the region and I spoke enough of the lingo, and by this time I was comfortable with traveling outside. But it meant that I would have to go out every day into the red areas in all of Iraq; that’s what it meant. There shouldn’t have been one; there should have been 10 of us, but in the end it was P. J. Dermer, literally, and a retired Iraqi general who went with me, a translator once in a while, and then, depending upon where I went, I would get the help of one of the political parties or groups, or I’d even hire some people, sometimes at my own expense, and sometimes they came to me.

We would set up a quota for the three-to-four-week travel period. I'd make sure that by the end of the month in question we'd at least have so many people interviewed and then so many selected. Well, that was a goal, but there were some days I couldn't go out, there would be some days I'd be out and I couldn't get back, there would be some days when there would be very bad fighting some place and, of course, I couldn't get there. So whatever plan I made, it literally just came to waking up in the morning, trying to coordinate a visit far or near, and then, of course, anything could happen, just like in the city councils project, as to how many would show up.

I had to find Iraqis to really help me do this. I found several really, really energetic, conscientious Iraqis that really laid the groundwork for me, in Baghdad particularly, and in some of the outlying regions. The retired Iraqi general with me, General Munthir Nalu], had defected in 1991. He was a Christian, and he had contacts with the ICDC personnel. We formed little mini-networks all over the country. If I was going to be in Baghdad for a few days, I would have General Nalu contact Mosul through the CPA network and say, "We want to do this," and it took an inordinate amount of explaining and re-explaining, both to the Iraqis (because I couldn't go out somewhere without information handouts which had to be in Arabic), and to the CPA and to the military. "This is what we're looking for." We wrote many pieces, we did papers, we did memos, we handed them out at conferences. We requested help from everyone in Iraq, both civilian and military, like we did with the governance group, same philosophy there.

Of course, the questions would be "Who do you want? What do you mean, civilians? What level?" At this time we didn't know what the pay would be. At this time we didn't know exactly what we wanted them to do, because all we had was an organization chart. We did not know what they would be doing. The concept was to find, recruit, interview, and hire, with the caveat that we're looking for senior and senior middle positions. "We will place you in your position at the end of a recruiting train-up and work-up period. We can't tell you exactly what it's going to be now." And there were a lot of people that wanted to know "exactly what I will be doing," and we couldn't tell them that. Had we had more time and more structure and more strategy previously, starting in April, we could have drawn up all this structural stuff, organization, job descriptions, pay, training concepts, manuals, all that, and they would say, "Okay," and then we would have probably recruited for administrative positions. What were we recruiting for? "This is what you're responsible for, your likely position, and this is what you will do." That would have been, of course, the holy grail. We just were ahead of ourselves.

Q: Now, you're getting ready to go out and offer jobs to people. Had you now arrived at the point where the CPA has said, "Yes, we'll officially build a Department of Defense?"

DERMER: That happened en route. Bremer gave the order and then signed the Establishing the Ministry of Defense Proclamation, and we now had legal authority to say, "Okay, we are going to have a ministry."

Q: Do you remember what month that happened in?

DERMER: It had to be, I think, in December or January, maybe January.

Q: And who was cogitating over this whole thing? Where was the uncertainty about whether this was going to be a ministry or not?

DERMER: The debate was going on between Washington, Bremer, and the Senior Advisor for our office. Ambassador Bremer had senior advisors for all the primary ministries and primary functions, ambassadors, ex-ambassadors, one or two retired generals, one or two under secretaries of defense, once removed. That was the senior cabinet, if you will, and the determination was made through there. There was a lot of fighting. There would be a lot of writing about it today. There would be a lot of backbiting about not having this ministry earlier on. It was hard. We're paying now, from what I know is happening in Iraq, and we'll pay forevermore, because we had to do it on the run. The unique thing about the Ministry of Defense, though, was whereas all the other ministries started with some kind of existing structure, there was absolutely nothing to begin with for Defense. It was up to us how hard or how easy we'd make it or how big or how small.

Q: You had to recruit people in a big hurry, but you also felt it was necessary to go all over Iraq to do this recruiting. Why didn't you just look for people in Baghdad so you could get it going?

DERMER: That's a fair question. For legitimacy's sake. Number one, you had to be cognizant of all the parties, had to be cognizant of all the major sects, had to be cognizant of all the major influences in Iraq that you had to have representation from. Because this was the most sensitive ministry and we feared that, if it was Baghdad-centered, then you would almost get right back into the concept of a dictatorship where only one family or one group is in charge of the most powerful and the most sensitive, the most important ministry of all in Iraq, the "Tribe of Baghdad." If you did that you would immediately alienate the rest of the countryside. If there was any one ministry that people wanted to participate in, it was this one. If you think about it, philosophically the most important ministry in Iraq should have been justice, because that's really what makes or breaks the rule of law and puts you on the road to democracy; it's justice. Instead, justice, shmjustice; it's defense. "We need a PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) guy here. We'd better have a KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) guy there." The Shia were oppressed, so they'd better get the position of minister. So there's no way that you could not go outside of Baghdad.

But I had to start in Baghdad. Number one, my contacts on the City Council would be the key to getting to other places throughout Iraq and also throughout Baghdad, so I had to start in Baghdad, plus that's where I was. Two, Baghdad and Mosul had the most retired officers, so I had to start there anyway. The problem was, because it was a single effort with just one or two coming in from the outside, I could only get to so many places, and I was constantly under pressure and pushed to do more and get more.

We were also looking for what we thought was quality, and we had to get those that "get it." Well, that takes time, and we developed questionnaire sheets, which I have, and we developed vetting sheets and we developed some questions that had nothing to do, of course, with anything they were ever going to be involved in. They were questions just basically to determine someone's honesty. Can an Iraqi be honest? Could they say that they'd never won a major military campaign? Could they say that the old system was defunct? Could they say that we're

in need of a whole new world order? Could they say that the way that you guys are pushing us is really the way to go for the reasons that you say? We were just looking for Iraqis who would be honest in a group of Iraqis, which was culturally not something they would normally do. Again, knowing the Middle East culture helped me. General Nalu] and a few others drew up these questions that we staffed both in our office and with the US Army guys. These questionnaires also helped prevent the Iraqis from playing games. If you ask a group a question, they'd go downstairs and talk to one another, trying to find the answers they thought we wanted to hear. And what do you ask these guys? What separates an individual in the Middle East from his peers, the qualities that can allow him in three weeks' time be Deputy Minister of Defense in a democratic Iraq, or the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Armed Services?

Q: So give us a sample? What sort of things did you ask them?

DERMER: We would ask them point blank, "Do you understand the concept of democracy? Do you understand what it means to have civilian control of the military in a democracy?" We would ask them one group of questions which centered around Iraq's participation in past campaigns. "Were they worthy? Were they not? Did Iraq have any major victories in its history in war? Did they have any major victories in battle?" There were some in battle, but not really any major war campaigns. "Was the training in the Iraqi Army up to the standard of the rest of the Middle East?" They liked to think that they were better than any other army in the Middle East. The fact of the matter is they weren't. Were the standards that they had seen at Sandhurst, or in Pakistan, or India, above their own, or equivalent? From what we could tell, they were clearly above. We would ask the Iraqis to name one or two generals that they admired outside of Iraq. Who would they name? Would it be a Western or would it be an Eastern general?

Q: Were you talking only to former military at this point?

DERMER: For these questions, yes, but the questions would be mixed also. We would try and ask them some of the questions we would ask civilians. "Have you ever managed or administered anything in Iraq? If so, at what level? What was the hardest thing you had to do?" One question which they could never answer was, "What would you do differently today than you did in the day of Saddam?" That's a tough question. I found that it was hard to answer because they didn't understand it. "What do you mean, different? Under Saddam we had to do what we had to do." "Yeah, but what would you do different today if you had a chance, an opportunity, to provide feedback to a commander and express your opinions truly?" They'd say, "Well, I'd express my opinion truly." I'd say, "Well, what would you do differently? Do you regret anything you did under Saddam?" (a very sensitive question) and they wouldn't know how to answer it. So I actually stopped asking that one unless I found a real sharp officer and then I would put it to him. But really the questions were designed not so much for the specific answer but just to try to find anyone that would say something different in the whole group, because the group, civilian and military, would have a tendency to answer all alike or to see what their brother said.

Sometimes when the time permitted, we would have little group exercises that we would sit back and watch. We'd give the Iraqis a small problem and have them define the threats: "What's the greatest threat to Iraq today, what did it used to be, and why? Give me the analysis behind your

answer?” And that would always be tough. Again, without ever having any strategic thought, without ever having formulated anything on their own, they would give one-line answers. For instance they’d say, “Iran.” “Why?” “We have a 1,200-kilometer border.” “Anything other than that?” “Well, their border’s open. They’re not stopping the influence of the Shia.” Now, that wouldn’t be said everywhere. For instance, if I interviewed SCIRI groups or Dawa, they would not say that. To people from those groups, Iran is a country that they would need to start relations with. Another one of my questions was: “Who should Iraq renew its relationship with soonest and first?” and there would be unique answers. And then I would caveat; I’d say, “Does Iraq have to renew relations with anybody? Who does Iraq have friendships and relations with now today?” And there were some who would say, “We are friends with X.,” and we’d have to tell them, “No, you aren’t. You don’t have any relations today with anybody, period. At the level of mosque, maybe; with your brothers in Qatar, maybe; but you have no formal military defense relations with them.” We would ask, “Who should Iraq’s first defense relationship be with,” and Iraqis would inevitably, both civilian and military, always go to the military.

I was trying to make them understand that there was a new concept inserted between the premiership, whatever it would be called, and the military, and that was civilian-controlled defense. We would ask them, “What do you think that means?” We would ask, “Does a minister of defense have to have military experience? Can it be other than a man?” That was a question we used to really stir things up. A smart two or three would say, “Well, France has a woman minister of defense, why not?” The better answer was, “Well, maybe, but not now, not to start,” and culturally that’s the right answer, we thought. So we pushed them and said, “Okay, tell me your basis for determining the size of a military,” and they’d say, “The borders.” “Okay, just the borders? What else?” Very rarely could any Iraqi go more than one or two layers deep. With Iraq it could go five or six deep: the population, the budget, the constitution, the threats.

Now we’ve got a guy who’s obviously been somewhere. We would hit hard on the constitution, the word ‘the constitution’ which is “durf” in Arabic. “What determines the size, shape and function of any military in a democratic system?” The answers would be chief of staff, the minister and the president. We said, “Well, what’s the basis for a military in a society? What’s the basis for defense in society?” We were looking for constitution, rule of law, things like this, to see if they had a chance to get any of these new concepts. More often than not, they wouldn’t, but then the one that would, we’d key on him. “Okay, so you said constitution. What does it mean? What do you mean ‘constitution’? Give me an example.” All the time we had to be very careful, because just like we weren’t trained in civil, local leadership, when we were developing the city councils, we were also not experts in constitutional law and formation and function.. The smart Iraqi would take us on, and we’d put a tick next to his name and say, “Bring that guy down.” We had questions of repairing relations. We’d say, “Which country first?” like I said, and some Iraqis would say, “Jordan.” “Okay, why? Tell us why?” and they’d give a slight answer: “Kuwait.” “Why?” One of the answers we were looking for with Kuwait was, “Because we have invaded their country, held them prisoners, taken their lives; we shelled them; or Iran, where we lost the invasion and used chemical weapons.” There were those who would just come right out say, “We did this. Let’s forget this.” We were looking for someone in Iraq to say, “You know what? We blew it bad. The best thing to do is just go out and let them see our faces,” which is something else we had in our planning, to get these guys out, but we didn’t have a chance to do it. So there was a series of questions that we’d develop, take out, be careful

not to let them see them ahead of time, and quarantine guys. We had to literally learn how to quarantine people. We would try and do one-on-ones.

Q: Quarantine? Why?

DERMER: Well, quarantine the officers and the civilians from each other during this interview process, because they would want to go out and want to know what to say and how to say it. Their whole goal was to get hired and get in the system, most of them, and those who told us that upfront, that's fine with us. "We're here for a job." Fair enough.

Q: What kind of civilians, of what background, did you find that were recruitable?

DERMER: We did and we didn't. When I say, "We did," we went all throughout Iraqi society and tried to pitch to the Iraqis that anybody can be in the Ministry of Defense. What we want are those with higher degrees, a little bit older and mature. We tried to stay above the age of 30 in the beginning, at least 30. I got pushed to get younger people in by one of my bosses. I wanted to get some senior guys in and let them be in charge of developing younger guys. Wrong answer for Middle Eastern society. Maybe not wrong, but it was just turning out not to be the best answer. It might have been better to go with, like, the Estonian model. We learned with very young people that were hired very early on. You let them make mistakes and learn together, because coming back to the elderly was an old system. With the elderly, you were bound to go backwards to the old steps. This was true for most, but not all, and that was my goal, to find the ones that could think their way through that, think through how they had to train younger people, how they had to think differently, no matter how much it hurt. I would tell Iraqis this. One of my keys to working out there on my own was that I was very, very, very blunt. I had noticed growing up in the system that senior people rarely ever were blunt. They wanted to make nice; they never wanted to say the straight thing. In this period in Iraq, as ugly as it was, and as traumatized as they were, and with what was facing them, we thought it better to be blunt with the ones that I ended up working with.

Q: The Iraqis, you mean?

DERMER: The Iraqis, yes; some with others, but with Iraqis primarily; not arrogant and not disrespectful, but blunt. In my eyes, it provided big payoff. Iraqis came up to me all over Iraq and said, "We respect you for the way that you're doing what you do. We don't like it. We don't like what you say sometimes, but we respect you. You are serious about your job. You get it. We know you have a hard job. You understand us, and we can take it." A lot of Iraqis would say to me, "Hey, you're not going to like it. Can I say this?" I said, "Yes, say it." "Can I disagree with you?" "Absolutely, disagree with me, but show me why."

We changed the opening speech we would have to give all the time. First, it was, "This is what we're looking for. Let's go." Then we changed it to, "Do not tell me what I want to hear. Answer the question. In your culture you have difficulty answering a question. You have a tendency to want to go back to history. I don't want to hear any history lessons. I don't want to hear about the Kurdish gassing. I don't want to hear about the crimes against whatever, or when your brother was killed or how many of your family have died. What I want you to do is just

answer my question, what comes to mind. You can take your time, but just answer my question.” This is not an easy thing to say in this region, this culture, but I would caveat it by saying, “I don’t have the answers either. I’m not going to sit in front of you today and think that I could pass this test. I’m not going to sit here and tell you that I’m looking for the perfect answer. Oh, by the way, I am honored to be here, it’s an honor for me to do this; and I’m humbled. We don’t know what we’re looking for at the end of the day. What we’re hoping to find is a few of you that will want to participate in this—it’s damn dangerous, and I can’t promise you security—and will come forward and help us do this, because we can’t do it alone.” In some manner of speaking we would say those kinds of things. It ended up being the right things to say to them, to level with them, but never 100 percent. There would be 100 Iraqis, 1,000 Iraqis, that would come up to me afterwards and say, “If only I had said this or I had done that.... “I can’t tell you,” I would reply. “I don’t know, but from where I sit right now, even if you’re not first choice it doesn’t mean you won’t be employed later. The ministry will be big, the army’s going to be big, but on this muster you didn’t pass.” “But I’m this and I’m that, they’d reply.” “I know that, and I respect your credentials, but you didn’t make it here,” and I’d be honest with them, so everyone knew right where they stood when we left.

Q: At what point did you get the crucial number that you were looking for?

DERMER: We did in a period of months. In the first big recruiting period, since I started early in November, before it became official, the first three people that we had to send somewhere, to do something officially, were those we planned to send to the NESAs course, Near East South Asia course, over at Fort McNair University as part of the National Defense University. It is the equivalent of the Marshall Center in Germany. They have a two-week seminar every so many weeks a year. They gave us slots for three Iraqis, and we found three—four; but one quit on us right away—and then we found an elderly gentleman, 63-year-old Sabat, born in 1937, who had been to Sandhurst and had been an academic. A very straightforward guy. He’s still there today. We found a young guy that one of the brigades had been using as a translator, but he also had a doctorate in engineering, a very smart young fellow. He asked me if he could come to the ministry, and I brought him in for an interview and he did wonderfully, but he left just as soon as he came back from the course. Then we also sent a young guy, a lieutenant colonel, from the army.

Q: Why did the other young guy he leave?

DERMER: Because we could not promise him what his position would be, how much the money would be, and what his future was, and he had a good thing going between the translation duties for the brigade commander and a business on the side. My bosses got mad. I said, “Leave it. This is going to happen a lot. One way or the other we’re going to lose guys, good guys.”

Q: At this point isn’t it apparent to the CPA that they’ve got to be able to make concrete offers to people if they’re going to keep them?

DERMER: No. We wanted to, but as we were in the process of doing all this—think about eight or nine tiers, like a racetrack, all happening at once—we wanted to have it more sequential and more empirical; we just never got there. We couldn’t. We were trying to build, recruit,

decide, develop. We didn't have a place, we didn't have a building, yet. We had to find a building. Every building was destroyed, you know, and had to be rebuilt from scratch. The old ministry was completely destroyed. Iraqis wanted to go there, and we had a big argument on whether to go there or not. One, it was outside the Green Zone. We had so many issues to work at one time for the group of eight of us now. Celeste and a couple others came in. Yes, we fully understood the need for concrete job offers, but there was no way to get there in the time we had. While I was recruiting, others were also doing it. It was phenomenal, just getting people out, and it was hard to get out. It was hard to get people in. I had to key in on a couple of Iraqis that would get people even to come to me. Again, just like the councils, four would show up one day, and the next time it would eight or 20, from seven o'clock in the morning till it got dark, because the buildings wouldn't have electricity or heating in the winter. We'd have to quit at dark because of lack of heat. I was wearing a winter jacket with boots on as I was doing these interviews. I had guidelines for who I wanted to participate, but the Iraqis wouldn't do that. The Iraqis brought in the numbers. If I would go out to a place and be the person on the ground, I'd say, "You four, you eight, you 10." But when I had to leave it up to contacts, which, of course, I had to do anywhere outside of Baghdad and sometimes inside Baghdad,, instead of bringing 10, they'd bring 50, and we'd have to have a little triage from the beginning: age, rank—I wouldn't look at anyone under colonel or anyone under 30 for civilian—at least a bachelor's degree in something, some kind of work experience. But the country was devastated, it was traumatized. People wanted to go to work in the army, but disbanding the army was a very emotional issue for people, and all these guys thought they now had a chance to get back in, and I had to go through a lot of people.

I had to walk into a hall full of hundreds of former officers and military guys, some Fedayeen, a lot of Baath Party guys, some that had fought us in the war. And I'm the one American walking in this big hall, smoke-filled, sometimes dark and no air, saying, "My name's Colonel P. J. Dermer. I'm here today to find a few good men for the senior Iraqi Army. And, by the way, if this works out, we can restore the honor of your military." I used that as a catch. I really wanted them to go one step higher. "My goal is to restore you honor. Never mind what happened in past wars. If you cooperate with us here and we make this work, you'll be able to retire, sit on your porch and sit in front of your family with your back straight saying you did something for Iraq. We can do that."

Q: Were there ever situations where they became hostile and you had to give up and leave?

DERMER: Yes, there were a couple of those. We were attacked twice, had two IEDs, incendiary explosive devices, which were the greatest killer of soldiers in Iraq. We had two, placed in the compounds we were interviewing in. Since they couldn't assault us directly in this compound because we had guards and gates, they put the bombs at the gate intending to detonate them when we went in or out. Both of them luckily were detonated prematurely. There were also other times when there was fighting in the area we were in, and we had to sometimes stop what we were doing, take cover or stop altogether. A lot of times nobody would blink, depending how close the rounds came or things came through. Other times the crowds got a little unruly. The good thing was that even though they were crowds of Iraqis, because they were officers and/or military, most from the military side, and the civilians were more academic, intellectual types that I was going after, it never got to the point where I feared for my life. But it

did get to the point where people were shoving and yelling and getting in my face a lot with “Why not me?” and “I have this experience,” and “I came up to you and you promised,” and this and that. I would have to change venues, of course. I couldn’t keep going to the same places due to the threat. I would go to people’s houses. I would change. Other times the Iraqis would say to me, “Hey, you’ve got to come back to the same place where the attack occurred.” Normally you would let that settle down for a while. I’d say, “Well, I can’t,” and the Iraqis said, “It’s the best place for us to be and for me to get these guys here,” and I said, “Okay, if you’re going to that effort and your life is clearly in danger as well, I’ll go.” You know, people that were working with me on the Iraqi stuff were trying not to go to some of the threatened venues sometimes. I didn’t do that a lot, but if I wanted to get the people and that’s where they were going to be, we would have to do it. We’d take the risk.

Q: How many people were you able to interview in a day?

DERMER: We started doing groups. We would do groups of eight to 10 or 10 to 12 around a table, and it wasn’t a bad way to do it, because you could tell by actions and answers. It would take about an hour, 45 minutes or an hour, for that group. You could kind of tell, at least we thought we could, as to who in the group at least could speak. A lot of people would come and never say a word, and they knew that they just didn’t have what we were looking for. Then you could also tell by the way they shook my hand or by the way they came up to me afterwards, because I would always make sure that I would greet them when they walked in and personally shake the hand of every person when they walked out, personally greet them and look in their eyes. There were thousands that I had to do, and you could tell. They’d look down or kind of shake my hand and say, “I know I didn’t make it.” I’d say, “You’re right, you didn’t.” They just couldn’t even go there, couldn’t get any of the answers, couldn’t get any of the concepts, anything.

Q: What kind of civilians did you end up with then?

DERMER: A cross-section of society as best we could. Unfortunately, most came from Baghdad. A lot of areas were uncooperative. A lot of areas didn’t get it. A lot of areas were afraid of the Ministry of Defense. A lot of areas were afraid to be in that public profile. As I sit here today, I know that of all those that we’ve interviewed and hired, we lost three from the ministry—I just heard about another one yesterday—and we lost three from the council.

Q: You lost three, meaning killed?

DERMER: Assassinated, a general; I found out two days ago, a NESAC Center graduate. Two from the NESAC Center had come to the States, returned, and have been assassinated. And we have academia. We have a really talented woman from operational science, a young lady and a lawyer from Nasiriyah, who was a good find. We have some younger types that just happened to be managers, businessmen. We found several from the old military-industrial commission, technical types for things like accounting, administrative, finance. Those were a little bit easier to find because they’re technical jobs. They didn’t need to learn how to do their job; they needed to learn how to do it in a new system with a little bit higher technological tools. But by the end I

got out to all branches of society, unfortunately they were mostly ex-military, but by the nature of Iraq that's what we had to live with.

Q: In the end what was the ethnic make-up of the group that you selected?

DERMER: We had to look at that, of course. I did three main recruiting periods, January, February- March, and then several others. The first two groups were going to be the senior/no-less-than-senior middle group. They were going to be the seed. The third group was intended to be the larger recruitment, younger recruitment effort that would fall under the first two groups. As a matter of fact, the original intent was that after we did the two main groups they would recruit the third. It never happened; we did it. So we found people for the senior positions—it didn't mean senior people—and they were a crosscut. The first month was mostly Sunni, because it was mostly Baghdad, with a few Shia, and one or two Baghdad Kurds. We had put the word out time and time again to all the senior leadership in Iraq, but it took so long for most of them to come around. All of a sudden, after I did the first two groups, or in the middle of the second group, SCIRI came on line and said, "When are you going to come see us?" "We gave you the information eight weeks ago." "Yes, but we didn't understand it. We didn't know." I got the word from my boss: "Go to SCIRI, go to Dawa,." Of course, his thinking was SCIRI and Dawa in Baghdad, and I told him, "Be careful what you ask me now when you say SCIRI and don't forget we're the ones that are responsible for carrying the word around Iraq, because that information campaign still is terrible. I'm going to go to Hilla and Najaf and Karbala and Basrah and Nasiriyah and Amarah." He looked at me and said, "Do you have to?" I said, "Yeah, we have to. To do it right, we have to. We can't stay in Baghdad and make them come in. We've got to go out to them."

So out we'd go. We went south for the second group as best we could into Shia environs. It was hard, because after Saddam the Iraqis were intellectually destroyed, period, lock, stock and barrel, atomized, downtrodden, beaten. We'll be lucky if we can get anything going there in a few years. The Shia area is where they are more destitute, poorer, more beaten up, so it almost became a truism that, as I went down the list, even if sect was not designated on it I could guess it was Shia from the quality of the application. The application that we printed did not have sect on it, and we would use that as ammunition against the parties, saying, "We're not asking an applicant's sect. We're getting the best in quality." Every interviewee would say, "Only quality, only the best, only the scientific should get into your system." We said, "We agree." But then at the end of the day they all wanted to know what sect we had chosen. It was very, very, very hard to find competent Shias. It was easier on the civilian side than on the military side, because Saddam had just destroyed that part. They just didn't have it anyway. It just wasn't there.

When the SCIRI party and I had our little coffee meeting prior to my interviewing or setting the conditions for how the interviews would work and what I wanted, they argued that the result had to be 50/50. I pushed back and said, "I warned you about that. I'm looking for quality, and we will put quality in the positions. We will balance it the best we can. It's not going to be 50/50." I said, "If you ask me for 50/50, you're going to lose anyway, because you don't have it, and you know it. The Shia as a population do not have what the Sunni have because of repression, schooling, opportunity. You don't have it. So at the end of the day it would fall anyway. It would fall. The delta would show, and you know it would. Why do that? If I find a great Shia

man or woman, he or she is going to go in a good place, a leadership position, an operational position, not over here in finance. That's our goal, that's our intent." "Okay," they looked at me and said, "All right, we'll see what happens." They were very good in their organization, and they also gave me a great margin of safety to be with those guys.

Q: You're looking on the basis of merit. How did it work out in the end?

DERMER: It worked out okay, in our eyes. It was a pretty good spread. It wasn't 50/50. In the third group we then pushed for the Kurds. The exact numbers I can't tell you, because it's all just changed, but it was pretty close. At the end of the day it was like 34 percent, 32 and 29, whatever, to make that 100, but it was somewhere in there. It was not bad at all. Don't forget, though, we didn't have the Christian or Syrian or Chaldean population we wanted. They never came forth. We got word they weren't interested, and when I went out to poke them and prod them, no. Got them on the local councils but couldn't get them in the ministry. We had a senior Christian officer who never gave us a name. He's now the spokesman for the prime minister. You'll see him on TV. I recruited him, personally, with lot of effort, and he never gave us one name himself.

Q: Did you ever find out why that's the case?

DERMER: Afraid as far as I can tell. Distrustful of any kind of system or getting in the middle of the Shia-Sunni battleground. Turkomen, I made a very big push for Turkomen. Got some great lists but never had time to follow up. We did get one or two, but we never had time to get a fuller interview schedule before we left, and the army never did anything with the lists that I gave them in the Turkomen group.

Q: So no Turkomen got recruited in this effort?

DERMER: Just one or two to date that I know of, but I made a special push in Kirkuk and the western side up towards Dohuk for them. By the time I left, I had a surplus. I had about eight or nine different groups that were waiting. I was the first interview. Then they had what we called their follow-on interview with the Committee, they'd go to the army or the Ministry of Defense. We had tried to get the Iraqis to do it. We did the first two. We had almost 30 or 40 days between the third group having to go to schooling and the next step.

By the way, the United States wanted two months' visa processing. That's another whole nightmare I'm not going to go through here, about getting these guys to the States, but it was a brutal nightmare, 24 hours a day, to get the visa applications done in time to get them to the States. The United States system, based upon 9/11, was absolutely unhelpful. It was a nightmare, a nightmare, and we had to do it. There weren't other people to do it. I didn't come back from my recruiting and put away the weapons and take off the vest and change my sweaty shirt from the day or let go of the intensity or whatever and then say, "Okay, here are the visas." No, I had to go type them or get photos made. The Iraqis could, of course, never do it. They could never answer the questions correctly. And you couldn't call anybody. There were no phones. The people who lived outside of Baghdad, you couldn't talk to them.

Q: So how did you fill out the visa application?

DERMER: With great difficulty on two or three days' notice: find someone to get them down to Baghdad, stay, or find someone to go up there and type them with a computer, but you had to print it because we couldn't save Adobe; make them get their photos taken three or four times; and you'd send them in very late, and the consular section in the States would say, "It's too late; we can't do it. What are you guys doing? You're not giving us enough time." Sometimes we had to move the courses. At NESAs we had to have them adjust the courses because we couldn't get there. Everybody was beating on us hard: "Why can't you get it in earlier? Why can't you find the people? You've got to do this differently," and we would say, "Okay, fine. You come over here." Then we'd clean the bathrooms and sweep the floors and take out the trash and do everything else. There wasn't anybody. Nothing stopped for us. We'd just roll on to something else: had to get the car cleaned or tuned up or tires checked before you went out, because a car could not break down in Iraq, you couldn't have a car break down.

Q: We keep hearing here in the States about the contractors who are brought to do the basic service jobs in Iraq, but then when I interview people, they say things like you just said, that you had to do a lot of that stuff for yourself. So where's the gap here?

DERMER: It's just a lot of things to be done in a lot of places, that's all. The Green Zone was a dirty mess. The palace was dirty. They did the best they could with what they had, but at the end of the day, who's managing, who's leading these guys, who are they, what group is it, who's in charge? Contracts changed all the time. KBR (Kellogg, Brown, Root) did what they could do. There was no semblance of adult supervision or leadership out there actually for most things. If I had had to depend on the system to get the recruiting done or whatever, we would have never built the Ministry of Defense or we would have done it with 10 people from Baghdad like you said. There was no one to go to.

Q: So now you have done the recruiting that you have described and you have gotten these people off to training. Before you left, was there any other major undertaking that you were engaged in?

DERMER: There were two things. We had developed a program to have mentors—a six-tiered program: find/recruit/ train/establish the ministry, and then mentor. In other words, as with the councils, we built the council, but what we needed was the professional expertise to take a council and say, "Here is an economics committee; here's how you do roll call," you know, Roberts' rules. We knew we were going to be leaving and we knew that we only had so much time to barely get the ministry out there. It was a phenomenal effort by the people in our office that got the ministry built, first off, the pre-ministry, a little schoolhouse that they got built to hold the initial candidates, and then the ministry where they were actually going to work. It was my two Australian guys, and it was Pulitzer Prize, or whatever the prize would be, how they got that done. What they did, in my eyes, was extraordinary. We knew at the end of the day we're done, CPA was going to fold, we had to go. So how do we cement this, how do we glue it, again just like the council? Well, mentors; we put out a call to the Coalition nations, as far as I could tell—Celeste was more involved in that than I was, our boss—and the Brits came on strong and sent some out. We had Eric, the Estonian, with us, who was eventually going to develop the

intelligence structure. We eventually went down the road to do intelligence anyway. We did it without waiting, and it was a good thing, because by the time we were leaving everybody wanted to know where intelligence was and what was wrong with it and how come we didn't have a structure? That's another whole bedtime story. Eric is still there today as a contractor. We wanted mentors from OSD, senior guys, ex-whatever, assistant secretaries, retired GS Senior Executive Service, experts in policy, strategy, admin, whatever it would take, because it's our system that we've now planted on them and it's our concepts, our philosophy, our work ethic, and we needed those Western ideals stamped on their foreheads, and not every other day but daily. Well, Britain ponied up, and there are a few out there now. To date I think we've only sent one, but other than that it hasn't happened.

Q: Are you talking about people that work alongside a particular position in the ministry?

DERMER: Yes. For instance, after basic recruiting was done and we got our fourth or fifth group off to the States, I was the advisor for the senior military advisor, for a four-star Iraqi general. We created two four-star positions in the ministry. One is a senior military advisor, and one is the chief of staff of the Iraqi Army. The army team had the Iraqi Army and the Joint Force Headquarters. As Defense, I went to work with this ex-Kurdish Peshmerga commander, a KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) gentleman, a great guy, General Mubaka. So I rolled in to build his office, because the concept was totally new. He asks, "What's a senior military advisor?" We had many hours discussing what that meant. There were those who thought this was equivalent to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, senior military advisor to the Minister of Defense and by default to the Prime Minister, a senior national security council apparatus. We were going to give him a small policy staff, four or five, and establish what it meant and how it worked and how they interacted, and what his role was. I'd be in his office from eight to 12 or eight to one, and then I'd go back to my office. We never did get that fully vetted out, the difference between him and the Chief of Staff. In the Iraqi culture the Chief of Staff was the senior military person in the country. I fully agree with that. We made the senior military advisor by concept the senior military person in Iraq. It doesn't work for Iraqis; the Chief of Staff is the chief of staff. He lambasted me before I left saying we had screwed this up and we hadn't cleared it up yet, so "When are you going to get it cleared up?" Fair enough. The idea was that he would brief military policy and not interfere with the operational nature of the army in the Joint Force Headquarters. He's a Kurd. He's got 26 years in the Peshmerga and left the Iraqi Army as a lieutenant, but he gets it more than anyone else gets it. So these are the kind of things that need to be followed up on.

The J5 for the Multinational Force Iraq came in, and they wanted to liaise at that policy level. I said, "The Senior Military Advisor is a name for you, as is the equivalent of the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and the young gentleman down the hall and a couple others. Those are the guys you need to interface with. Your core, your war fighters, need to stay at this level, and then Petraeus' guys should stay at training with some interface at the operational level. This was our concept. That I tried, but I couldn't make it happen before I left. I had two or three weeks to make it happen, but no one in that policy staff or Multinational Force Iraq had Middle East experience, period. I warned them that you just can't come over here and sit down and try to show them briefings, especially when you keep doing it in English and not getting it translated into Arabic. You can't come over here and sit down and get a one-on-one conversation on

strategy. They don't have it; they're not there. Number two, they're still getting formed. Number three, it's our concepts we're putting on them, even if you do get it translated into Arabic. So you have to do more than just come over to meet your counterpart. He's not a real counterpart yet, and he's not going to be for a long time. You've got to mentor, you've got to teach, you're going to have to write, you're going to have to crayon, you're going to have to coax, you're going to have to do whatever it takes if you're going to take on this role, because we're leaving. We feel bad about it, but we functionally have to go. It was just too broad and too big a concept for them to get, which made them even more gun-shy about the real work they had to do, which was development of strategy and military policy at their level. So to date that has not been realized.

The mentors have not come from the States yet. I think there's only one right there now, and the other is still in the decision stage. What you need are 25 to 30, 10 to 12, I don't know how many, to fill in what we were doing plus teach concept, do more recruiting and stuff. People who can say, "All right, here's a national military strategy development, here's a policy paper. All right, what does Iraq face today?" All the Iraqis, of course, wanted to get in a tactical mode. They all want to go out and find their brothers or report intelligence. They all have ideas of how to stop the insurgency, but it's all very tactically oriented. At the level we were at, you need to think about Iran in five years, Syria in two years or five years, Jordan and Saudi, whatever. They are unsure where to start, unsure how to begin.

My final position there was what I was supposed to be all along. I was technically on loan from DIA while I was in Iraq. The real reason I was out in Iraq was to establish a defense attaché office for the new embassy. That was the real reason I was there. Since I needed a home, I called what came to be the office that would build the Ministry of Defense my parent organization for a while and ended up getting fully involved with them in this development. I don't regret it a bit, but my parent headquarters was technically DIA and they wanted me exclusively to concentrate on setting up the attaché. Well, we couldn't do that, because without any kind of movement towards the embassy there was no position for an attaché. That said, once we finally started the transition to an embassy, it turned out that there would not be a defense attaché. The reason was primarily because the Ambassador thought that they had enough military out in Iraq to handle any of those military issues, but the function of the operational military in a country is different than the responsibilities of a defense attaché. A couple of the ways that I tried to sell it was, number one, we had just built two institutions within Iraq that needed both mentoring and follow-up, and I had literally recruited most of the senior Iraqi defense institution single-handedly. I built it with a group, but I'm the one that went out and found them, and there's a particular kinship that I have with all the senior military and defense officials. As I speak today, I can call any one of them up on the phone and say, "What's going on? What are you doing? Stop it. Don't do this. Go here, go left, go right," and they don't mind. They call me up all the time and e-mail me almost every day. So I said, "If for nothing else, we have to maintain that continuity. Never mind every factor, giving me reporting information or knowing what's going on." The second thing I said, is, "Who will maintain the relationship or develop the relationship with the Coalition nations now? How will we know what they're doing and what they're thinking?" A lot of them are trying to make inroads into the

defense institution and to the senior military, to try to get their feet in there, and that's a job for a defense attaché.

Well, to make a long story short, we did not win the battle, and as we speak there is no defense attaché office in Baghdad, and we're feeling the effects by not having a good sense of the information about what's going on within either the ministry or the senior hierarchy of the Iraqi Army right now. There's most likely operational reporting going on. I'm not privy to it at the moment. General Petraeus, who's in charge of building the army and the police and the other security structures, most likely has a reporting chain, but functionally we do not know what's happening within the institutions we built, both in their development and their continuity and their maturity. We have no eyes on it.

My main point in saying this is that we made a series of strategic mistakes and strategic misassumptions and calculations going into this whole conflict, and here when we transition again from CPA to embassy, we're a bit shortsighted on the thinking, the nature, the level that we're operating at in Iraq.

Q: Could you elaborate on that?

DERMER: We've got a whole new system that we're trying to build in Iraq. It takes a lot of people, it takes a lot of mature people, a lot of people that have been in the region for a while. It takes a little bit headier thinking than just going to work and writing a cable or getting a conference built or trying to find a few people to run a country. There are a lot of issues out there that are meshed in many different ways, that will all help us analyze what's going on and where we need to go in the future, and they're not small issues. They're big issues, strategic issues. Because whatever we do in Iraq affects the greater Middle East, and everyone in the Middle East is watching what we're doing in Iraq, good, bad or indifferent, every move we make. We have to get this right. The thinking that says that we don't need a defense attaché office, that we only need five people in the pol-mil shop, as they have out there right now, to me shows, again, shortsighted strategic thinking and lack of understanding the nature of what we're about to embark on. While many think the Embassy is big, most of the people there are those that are left in Iraq to rebuild the technical side of Iraq, the Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office, not the more time-honored political/military/economic section, which is more important now than it ever has been, I would argue, because, again, what we do in Iraq has ramifications throughout the Middle East as a whole.

The President told us one of the strategic assumptions going into Iraq was regime change in Iraq en route to greater transformation of the Middle East as a whole. He didn't say regime change in Iraq and we're done. He said we have a bigger mission here. We need to staff that mission accordingly and think upon those lines. I still don't see it in the thinking we're doing right now.

Q: Having had all this experience, if you had to do this over again, how would you do it differently?

DERMER: If your primary goal is the transformation of a region, you have to change your strategic assumptions, which in this case were very wrong. We thought that automatically

regime change would lead to establishment of, in our eyes, a better nation or democracy for Iraq, which in turn would lead to change in the Middle East, hopefully for the better. That's not something you do overnight. That's something you plan for and take time on.

I would have looked at the war in different terms and/or I would have taken time to let the planning mature a little bit for the post-war effort, because at the end of the day that's more what counts than the toppling of a regime. There was never any doubt in anyone's mind about the military capabilities to topple Saddam. That was a given, a no-brainer, but we spent way too much work in that campaign planning and on the Coalition campaign, in getting those to join us on our road for that effort. We barely got into the planning for what would happen afterwards, and by the time we did, it was too much, too fast, ad hoc. It came on the backs of a bunch of great Americans and Coalition folks and the United States military to assume the dual role of both fighting an insurgency of the most complicated kind and at the same time trying to create nation-building tools. That's not to say it can't be done, but it most assuredly can't be done in a short period of time nor should it be rushed. So what we needed to do was take a moment, look at where we are in our campaign planning for the military, and then look at where we are for the campaign planning for the post-military phase. Anyone of Middle Eastern experience could have easily seen that we needed more time, and anyone that ever studied the campaigns of post-World War II could have surely seen the same thing. If we wanted to foster success, time and expertise is needed to set those goals. We just simply didn't allow for that.