

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

JIM NELSON
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviewed by: Haven North
Initial interview date: September 7, 2004
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Jim Nelson is 54 years old. He received his B.B.A from The University of Texas at Arlington and his J.D. from The Texas Tech School of Law. From 1959-2002, Nelson served as the Texas Commissioner of Education. He served as the Senior Advisor for the Iraq Ministry of Education from June 2003 through September 2003. Currently, Nelson is the Superintendent of Schools in Richardson, Texas.

As the Senior Advisors assigned to the Ministry of Education, Nelson was responsible for overseeing the Ministry of Education until such time as the Governing Council could appoint interim ministers. This work included organizing the ministry to do effective budgeting, school renovations, curriculum and textbook updates, and increasing teacher pay. Nelson also worked with the coalition and various in-country aid groups trying to help schools get reestablished and get reopened in the fall.

Nelson discusses the educational climate in Iraq. He was encouraged that parents insisted their children take end-of-the-year exams. However, the Ministry of Education was in considerable disarray due to the removal of the leadership and the poor condition of the Ministry building. The educational system was very depressed: facilities were in terrible shape, teachers were under paid (less than \$10 per month), and textbooks were laced with Saddam Hussein propaganda. The previous regime had invested very few resources in education the past 20 years.

During his time in Iraq, Nelson helped run education projects that renovated at least 1,200 schools, revised textbooks, provided student packs and teacher packs full of school supplies and promoted increased teacher pay and teacher training.

Nelson note several issues on the horizon for the Iraqi education sector, including (1) subject-matter taught in the schools; (2) the role of religion in school; (3) Arabic/Kurdish language issues. Nelson's goal was to establish consensus-building processes that would be able to concretely deal with such issues. He recommends further revising the school curriculum and textbooks, focusing on teacher training and obtaining international support to build as many schools as fast as possible.

Back in Texas, Nelson is now attempting to establish programs that allow for students and educators in Iraq and the United States to communicate with one another.

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Q: Jim, what was the period of time you were in Iraq?

NELSON: I actually left Washington on July 21st of 2003 and returned to the States about September 11th, 2003. So, not quite three months. I think I was actually gone from the States just over eight weeks. I've forgotten the exact amount of time. I was in Washington for about a month, so it kind of gets confusing. I was gone from home about three months, but I was in Iraq or Kuwait about two months.

The Assignment

Q: What was your position?

NELSON: I was one of the Senior Advisors assigned to the Ministry of Education.

Q: What is a Senior Advisor?

NELSON: Senior Advisors were charged with assisting the remaining staffs of the various ministries in getting reorganized. Many in the Education Ministry at least, most of the top-level staff had been Baath Party members and were let go after the Coalition moved into Baghdad. Our responsibility was to work with the remaining people to try to help the ministry get organized until such time as the Governing Council could appoint interim ministers, and obviously to work with the Coalition and the Coalition partners and the various aid groups that were in the country trying to help schools get reestablished and get reopened in the fall.

Q: Whom did you report to?

NELSON: I reported directly to Patrick Kennedy, who was Ambassador Bremer's Chief of Staff. No, that's not exactly right. There was initially a person named Campbell, who may have very well had ambassadorial rank, and there were a number of senior advisors that kind of reported to him, but in effect we reported to Patrick, who would report to Ambassador Bremer.

Q: Within the CPA?

NELSON: Right, within CPA.

Q: Some people think of the senior advisors as being the Minister of Education, for example.

NELSON: Well, it varied from ministry to ministry. We, in effect, took that role, I think, because so many of the top-level staff at the ministry had been fired or terminated because of their Baath Party affiliations. The previous regime used education particularly for their purposes, and so most of the top-level appointees were very close to the regime, and so they were let go. It was stop-gap in the sense that we weren't to run the thing on a day-to-day basis but to help them get their budget together. We were very involved in facilitating the renovation of as many schools as possible during the summer. We were involved in textbook issues, beginning some conversations about curriculum, teacher pay issues. It was a pretty fundamental kind of thing we were doing, because they were basically out of business, and we had to get them back in business so that school could begin in the fall.

Q: How were you selected for this position?

NELSON: I think there was a liaison between the White House and the Department of Defense. At the time, the Department of Defense was staffing these various senior advisory positions, and they were creating teams for all of the ministries. Ours was one of the earlier ones, I guess. They had some people already on the ground there that had come up with Ambassador Garner and were either affiliated with USAID or some other affiliation maybe through the State Department, and when the DoD kind of took over that role, they were putting these teams together. I was Commissioner of Education in Texas for about two and a half years, first under then Governor Bush and then later Governor Perry, and was in private life with a private educational-related company in the middle of 2003. I'm sure my name came up in conversations that they could at least ask, and that's what they did.

Preparations for the assignment

Q: What kind of briefing or preparation did you have before you went out?

NELSON: We had very good briefing. I was very impressed with the quality of the information we got. Now, clearly when you got there you learned a lot of other things. The DoD had a team of people that they put together, some of them related to the Middle East, some of them just related with helping gather names and information for potential team members that we might need to help us. There were three of us in my team, all of us basically of equal rank: Leslie Arsht, whom I think you've maybe talked to; Bill Evers from California....

Q: All in education?

NELSON: Right, the three of us were essentially being asked to go over and do some of the things I just talked about. They come from somewhat different backgrounds, but we've all known each for a long time.

As I said, we all gathered in Washington about the middle of June. They gave us a small office in the Pentagon, and we began the process of trying to build a larger team. As it turns out, that didn't really happen until much, much later, even after we got there, but that was part of our purposes. We spent a lot of time educating ourselves about the Iraqi education system. We met with Iraqi expatriates. We had an expatriate assigned to us who actually arrived in Iraq a week or two before we did.

We had just a great deal of cooperation with the military and military family people who were at the Pentagon. Obviously, there's lots of logistics you have to arrange to travel that far away: **what do you take, what shots do you need, what equipment do you need, how do you get your books there, just a whole range of things when you're going to an area that obviously you had to go at least the last part of it by military transport.** So there was a great deal to do, and then just working out the logistics of kind of getting in line to get there. It took probably two weeks after we were ready to go for us to actually get from Washington to Baghdad.

The situation in Iraq and in education

Q: What was your understanding of the general situation in the country, particularly in education?

NELSON: We communicated, mostly by email, as we were preparing. We knew that school was out, that they had just administered the end-of-year exams, which we thought was a very hopeful sign. The parents had apparently insisted.

Q: This was done by CPA, though?

NELSON: No, actually it was done by ministry people with a lot of assistance by the Coalition forces, primarily American, and by CPA personnel. School was out for about a month, I guess, during the actual conflict, and then most of the kids, or a lot of the kids, came back and the parents wanted the end-of-year exams to take place, so Iraqis administered those. There were obviously logistical problems to overcome with transportation being an issue and communication an issue, but they managed to do that. That was all happening as we were just arriving actually.

Q: Who was the prime mover in getting that done?

NELSON: I'm not sure of a particular person. I know the CPA staff on the ground that was assigned to the Education Ministry before we got there had a lot to do with it. There was a lady named Dorothy Mazaka who was a Treasury Department employee loaned to USAID, as I recall, who was kind of leading the team. There were a couple of military young men -- majors, reservists -- who, because of their background, were very involved either on the teacher pay issues or the building renovations issues and the logistics of getting all these tests administered and then redistributed back to the schools across the country.

Q: How did you find the situation in the Ministry of Education when you got there?

NELSON: Well, as I said, the ministry itself was in considerable disarray because of the removal of all the leadership, so we basically assumed responsibility for trying to put it back together until the Governing Council, which had just been appointed itself -- or actually I can't remember whether it was appointed right before I went or right after I got there -- until they could assume the task of selecting interim ministers, which took until almost the time I left to happen. So we had a big role in that.

There were some Iraqi expatriates who had come back into the country. Three were assigned to us, all of whom had education backgrounds. One of them had lived most of his time out of Iraq in The Netherlands, one in England, and one here in the United States.

Q: Do you remember their names?

NELSON: The one from The Netherlands was Fuad Hussein, and Manotte -- and I can't remember Manotte's last name. I'm sorry; I should have brought my journal. I wrote names down where I'd remember them, but I don't remember the other gentleman. They were all PhDs. Most of them had taught. The two from Britain and the U.S. both taught in major universities, and the one from The Netherlands was involved in education in a variety of ways. They were extremely involved, as you can imagine, and helped us get the ministry to try to organize the activities that had to be undertaken over the course of the summer.

Q: The Ministry was looted, wasn't it?

NELSON: Yes, the Ministry building itself was unusable. They were in some temporary quarters, which they were still in when I left, but they were in the process of getting into better quarters. I think it was an ongoing problem, and I'm not real sure how it actually got resolved.

Q: I see. How did you find the education system generally?

NELSON: It was very depressed in the sense that the facilities were in terrible shape, teachers were extremely poorly paid making less than 10 dollars a month. One of the things the Americans and the Coalition generally did was to raise that pay significantly.

Q: How much was that? Do you know?

NELSON: I think the scale started -- and I know this seems absurd from our standards, but when you think of it in the context of six to 10 dollars a month -- I think they got it up to the beginning pay somewhere about 50 or 60 dollars a month, and it went up into the mid-hundreds, 150 or so. Of course, the hard part was the non-existent banking system which made [the Ministry] pay them in cash.

Q: Where did the money come from?

NELSON: I don't know what the ultimate source of it was. They were mostly paid in dollars, at least initially.

Q: Ministry budget?

NELSON: Part of some of the appropriations that Congress made or whether it was some of the money that they were able to attach when they arrived, I couldn't tell you that.

Q: What kind of an educational system existed under Saddam Hussein?

NELSON: It was a very central top-down kind of system. The Ministry pretty well ran everything from Baghdad. In the 17 or 18 governorates around the country, there was a director general who was responsible to the central authority. The director general would oversee the secondary schools. The elementary schools reported directly to Baghdad. It was a very cumbersome system that didn't work very well in my view. Now that they've gone from interim minister to minister, I know one of the things that they've worked on is some of the systems issues.

Like I said, the facilities were in horrible condition. The textbooks were laced with Saddam Hussein propaganda. Because the pay was so low, there were all kinds of stories of teachers taking bribes and forcing families to pay to have their kid come to school, asking kids questions about what their parents talked about at night. If they reported on people, they got extra pay, just all kinds of things like that. So, you had a whole culture that over time was going to have to be changed. Obviously, it doesn't happen overnight, but paying them more certainly helped. Removing the Saddam propaganda from the books would certainly help. Freeing them from that kind of coercion would certainly help. I think it's a long-term process, but I think we got off to a good beginning.

Q: I understood that a lot of the records were lost and they didn't know who was a teacher. Is that right?

NELSON: There was some of that. One of the ongoing issues that we were dealing with was who was in the Baath Party, who wasn't. We also had to identify at what level people were in the Baath Party because [the party] had a series of levels and there had been a decision made by Ambassador Bremer that if you were in the top two or three levels then you could not work in public service for some period of time. Most teachers didn't reach that level, but some administrators did. Thus, there were issues about who could teach and who couldn't and what their qualifications were, and it was just going to take a while to sort all that out.

Q: Right. Apart from the administration, what about the quality of education in the past?

NELSON: I think if you go back -- at least what we heard and from the studying we did

to some degree in Washington before we left -- I think at least probably until 1980 or so Iraq had one of the better education systems in the Middle East. This is still true today; they're very creative, very hard-working people who want very badly for their children to be educated, and I think that drove a decent system. When they went to war with Iran in 1980, they began drying up the funding stream to a considerable degree, so over the last 20-plus years very little resources have been put into education, and it really shows. It shows when you go into the buildings and obviously in the issues I talked about with teacher pay. At this point in time, at least before the Coalition arrived, the quality of education could only be called very, very poor.

Education projects

Q: What projects did you work on?

NELSON: I guess I was in management. I was involved in overseeing a couple of our military people that were working on renovation projects. It was very complicated because you had lots of people. Bechtel had a large contract in the country, but part of their contract was to renovate, I think, 1,200 or 1,500 schools. The military and the civil affairs part of the service was doing a lot of renovation. Many of the nongovernmental entities -- NGOs, non-governmental organizations -- were in the country, and they were doing small projects themselves. To keep people from stepping all over each other, it was really important that we keep track of who was going to be where and when and what Iraqi contractors they were trying to use. We were talking about thousands and thousands of schools in the country. Many of them didn't have names, or many of them had the same name or similar names, and their locations were often not accurately known. One of the things that occurred was the deployment of GPS monitors at all the schools so they could locate them, identify them and know who was supposed to be at this school and who was supposed to be at another one.

Q: You mean in the reconstruction?

NELSON: Elementary schools especially are very small in terms of their student population, but they have a very, very large student population in the country. As a result, you had to have many, many, many schools, far more than we would see in...

Q: What would be small?

NELSON: 200, 250. Over here, it's not unusual to have an elementary school with 500, 600, even 700 kids. This meant having twice as many schools, and they were just in terrible shape.

Q: You were able to locate them all?

NELSON: They were making real progress. Certainly by the time I left, we had sorted out most of the issues about who was going to renovate which buildings. They were doing good work. We did get out some and see some of the places where the U.S. military was basically overseeing the projects, and I was very impressed. Here are folks

from all over the U.S. that are there and they're working with Iraqi contractors getting the work done. In a period of sometimes three or four weeks, they could take a school that was just really dilapidated, and after you fix the plumbing and repaint and fix the playground up a little bit, it was at least a habitable place for kids to go to school.

Q: There were some complaints that maybe some of the schools weren't as well done. Who did the actual renovating?

NELSON: Mostly, the work was done by Iraqis which helped to infuse a lot of money into the economy. Like in any burgeoning free enterprise system -- it was interesting -- we watched as the prices got higher. Labor got more expensive as the weeks went by. They were doing most of the work being overseen by either military or NGOs or Bechtel or somebody else.

Q: Do you know what the average size of these individual renovation jobs was?

NELSON: I couldn't tell you an average, but many of them were \$25,000 or \$30,000, and they were beginning to get more expensive, not because the work was more complicated but because the labor costs were going up. It was getting somewhat more difficult to get the kind of equipment and supplies you needed, plus a guy that's got five jobs going at once knows he can charge a little more.

Q: When you say they were doing this, who is 'they' particularly?

NELSON: The Iraqi contractors are what I was referring to.

Q: And in the ministry who was doing this? Yourself, of course.

NELSON: At that point in time, the Ministry did not have too much to do with any of the renovation. They were helpful to us in locating schools, and they had some people that were really involved. The educator or the headmaster of the building would ultimately have to accept the work. It would also then go through the director general of that governorate who would have to sign off that, yes, the work had been done, it had been completed, and it was acceptable.

All of the director generals of the various 17 or 18 governorates, they either stayed in place or somebody was put in their place. Those folks were obviously very valuable to us because they knew the local conditions far better than we did. Plus, they were our people around the country that we could communicate with concerning what was happening in their particular locale. I came to Baghdad on one occasion, and we had a two-day meeting between us and UNICEF and UNESCO about dispersing student supplies and teacher supplies for the upcoming year. All this had been acquired through UNICEF and UNESCO and some of through USAID and one of their contractors.

Q: What were some of the other projects that you felt were particularly worthwhile?

NELSON: Some of the things that I was involved in on a limited basis: We took a trip up to the Kurdish provinces, and they had different sets of problems. They were very interested in retaining Kurdish as their primary language and making sure they had sufficient textbooks. Their schools, although they were not great by American standards, were certainly superior in terms of condition to what we saw in Baghdad and other places around Baghdad. They were wonderful to work with. Of course, they had been sort of under our protection for almost a dozen years and had operated in relative freedom during that time. Regardless, they were great resources to call on when people in other parts of the country would have questions about how you do this or how you do that. Instead of the Americans offering suggestions, we would try to use Iraqis where we could.

Q: To do what kind of things?

NELSON: Just some of the things I've talked about: what are we going to do about books and how are we going to get these student packs, and how are we going to make sure our teachers have adequate pay?

As you can imagine, there's lots of impatience going on especially in a situation where the communications, at least at that point in time in the summer of '03, were very limited. We didn't have telephone service to much of the country; there was no Internet service, no mail service, so you had to rely on couriers and that sort of thing.

Q: You mentioned textbooks. What was done about textbooks?

NELSON: Even before I got there, the Iraqis on the ground knew that they needed to do something very quickly about the books because the books were terrible. Let me suggest that the content wasn't that great because the texts were really old -- they would reprint them every year. They were very flimsy by our standards, and they were just laced with all this propaganda.

Q: Like what?

NELSON: Every book had Saddam's picture in it -- the words from the leader -- and there were lots of martial kinds of references in them, a lot of times anti-U.S., just the country's kind of demagoguery that was laced throughout. With the assistance of the expatriates who had come back into the country in April, [the Iraqis] formed a fairly large committee [of eighteen people] and agreed that what they would do is take each book and go through them and strike out the propaganda. Then, they would reprint the books without the propaganda, knowing full well that a more permanent solution was to appoint.... First of all, they needed to really address curriculum changes that have occurred over the last 25 years and then adopt and build textbooks aligned with their new curriculum, but clearly they couldn't do that last summer. What they had to do was get readable books in the hands of as many children as possible. So UNESCO and UNICEF both had put up large sums of money -- I want to say close to \$10,000,000 -- to get this process underway and to get the books reprinted once [the committee] had gone through and stricken the propaganda.

They were printing [the revised books] when I left, and I don't know what the process was for ultimately getting them into schools. Before, under Saddam, the schools were extremely crowded, which was probably going to continue to be the case for the foreseeable future, and the kids might have one textbook for every four kids or so; the hope was to at least double that as quickly as possible.

Q: But the quality of the book was not improved in terms of education?

NELSON: Well, no. That's not good, but you don't start with the books. You have to start with a complete review of curriculum. One of the tasks of the minister, Doctor Alwan, who was appointed by the Governing Council shortly before I left -- and I don't know where it stands, to be quite honest -- was to appoint a curriculum review committee who could study leading curriculums from around the world. One of the things Iraqis were getting to do for the first time was look outside their borders and see what some of the rest of the world was doing, including the rest of the Middle East. They were going to travel some, I think, and try to begin the process of developing strong curriculum standards for all of the subjects. Then, once you get to that point you can write new textbooks that are consistent with that. It's going to take a little while.

Q: You mentioned school packs. What was that?

NELSON: What they were trying to do -- and this again, a lot of it came from, I think, UNESCO; I get some of the roles of UNESCO and UNICEF confused -- one or the other was doing either secondary or elementary, and then USAID through one of their contractors -- I've forgotten the name of it [Creative Associates, ed] -- was doing the other. They were basically just student packs of school supplies with basic things like pencils, crayons if it was for really young kids, just the kind of basic things you'd need to start school -- a little backpack. I saw one of them at one of the meetings when they were talking about giving them out. Then, the teachers were all going to get a teacher kit that would have been the basic supplies a teacher would need to begin the year. They simply didn't have any of these things. They just were not available. I don't know what they were using, if anything. Most of the rooms had an old beat-up and sometimes completely unusable blackboard with desks that three or four kids would sit at. There might be 40 or 50 [students] in the room, and they were very small rooms. So, you'd go in a room and they would tell you that 50 kids would attend class in this room with one teacher. In America, you wouldn't put 15 kids in there.

Q: Were there other improvements that were being made in this early period to the educational system?

NELSON: Leslie was very involved in beginning the process of reviewing how they train teachers. They had a three or four-day workshop while I was there. From communicating with her afterwards, I know that those continued, and the teachers were not particularly well prepared beforehand from the various preparation programs they had. They were already beginning the process of looking at the whole way they prepared

teachers. I think the fact that they were going to be compensated better would clearly help draw people back to the classroom who had taught at one point in time but maybe had given it up because the pay was so bad. After all, taxi drivers got paid better. Ongoing teacher training was one of the things we were really....

Q: What were they emphasizing in that? Do you know?

NELSON: Just trying to get them to understand some of the modern pedagogy that was out there -- the philosophy had been for the last few years: the teacher would say it, and if the kid didn't get it, it was the kid's fault -- and trying to get them to be a little more interactive with the children so that they could assess and diagnose when the child had problems, and then give them some tools to know what to do about it.

Q: What about the university system? Do you have any familiarity with that?

NELSON: We had very little connection with the universities other than -- and I think Leslie would be much better than me to talk about this -- talking about teacher preparation kinds of issues. Higher ed had its own ministry. There was a person there named Drew -- and I've forgotten Drew's name -- who was the Senior Advisor. He left to come back to Washington, and the former president of St. John's College in Santa Fe went over there for a considerable period of time. He would have been the one responsible for working with the higher ed folks. I think they had like 18 or so universities. Nearly every city had a university, and most of the presidents were replaced. However, we didn't really have much interaction other than just talking at breakfast or lunch or dinner about some of the common things we were working on. I know that Leslie had some interaction with them about teacher preparation. They had some teacher preparation colleges that young people would attend if they wanted to be a teacher. They weren't into the university system as we would think of it. It was like going to a community college where you'd get your teacher's certificate. I think there was some discussion with Iraqis about what is that really the best way [to get teachers involved]. That was about the extent of it that I was aware of interaction with higher ed anyway...

Q: Was there any restructuring of the Ministry of Education? Or how was it structured?

NELSON: I'm sure that once Doctor Alwan got his feet on the ground he began making some changes, but I left shortly after that, and I just don't know. I'm not the person to ask.

Q: Was there any attempt at strategic planning and trying to have a longer-term vision?

NELSON: I know that was the plan to plan -- does that make sense? — and I'm sure it has happened. I just don't know what the outgrowth of it is.

Q: How did you find working with CPA?

NELSON: Most of the CPA people were committed, dedicated public servants. I had never really been around career civil servants, and it's an interesting life, to say the least, to be separated, especially when you go to a place like Iraq where you can't take your family. I just grew to admire their persistence and their willingness to be away from their families, which I found to be the toughest part about it, and I was only gone three months. So I came away with great respect obviously for our military young men and women, but these career people were like that as well.

It was a large enterprise, so you had people that you disagreed with from time to time. I thought, with very limited exceptions, that we had processes in place that you could work through issues like that. They had a governance unit where -- if there were inter-ministry conflicts -- you could go and get them sorted out.

I met with Ambassador Bremer a couple of times, and I thought he just exuded leadership. He was the kind of guy you knew was going to make decisions, and most of them turned out well. The last kind of person you needed in a role like that was somebody that wasn't decisive; Paul was very decisive, and I admired him. He had a lot on his plate, to say the least.

Security situation

Q: How was the security situation when you were there? Did you live in the Green Zone?

NELSON: Initially it was not too bad.

Q: You lived in the Green Zone?

NELSON: I lived in the Green Zone, started out in a ballroom in the palace on a big cot with about 100 of my closest friends. A couple of weeks later, I guess -- it seemed like longer -- we were able to get in one of the little trailers that were behind the palace, so that's where I lived the rest of the time I was there.

Q: But you worked in the Ministry?

NELSON: Actually, my office was in the CPA in the Presidential Palace. The Ministry was so dysfunctional and it was in a really, really bad part of town, so we didn't go there. The first few weeks we got out with the UN quite a bit, and you couldn't have security when you went with the UN because they're obviously neutral, and I didn't feel particularly unsafe or anxious. In fact, the first school visits we made were to the Sadr region of Baghdad where there's such turmoil right now.

After the UN bombing on August 19th, the UN obviously pulled back to a considerable degree, and from that point on, when we left, you either went with an Iraqi driver and in kind of a nondescript way or you went with security. You'd have a Hummer in front of you and one behind you, and you'd go in a SUV of some sort. So, we did it both ways.

Q: What happened to the work after the UN pulled out?

NELSON: It was a little more difficult because they were kind of an intermediary -- that might not be the right word. They were trying to be very helpful, and they were very helpful to us in terms of helping us get places and get information and talking to the right people and that sort of thing. They didn't all leave, but it was just more difficult to get things done, and that was unfortunate.

Q: How about getting the Ministry back in shape? Were you involved in that? What was involved in getting them up and running?

NELSON: I've kind of described the things that I personally did. Once they appointed Doctor Alwan, he really assumed the responsibility. It was obvious to me the first time I met him that this man was a leader. He was an Iraqi expatriate. He had been with the World Health Organization in Jordan. He was a medical doctor by training, but he had great leadership skills. He relied on us and asked for advice and suggestions, but he was in charge. He would have made it clear even had we not wanted it to be clear that this was an Iraqi undertaking with American assistance. He began the process of organizing his team with our assistance, and then after I left, obviously Leslie and Bill continued to assist him. Every report I got indicated he just did a wonderful job. Once the Interim Government took charge June 30th, Doctor Alwan has been appointed to head up the Health Ministry, which is really his first love, and they've appointed, I think, one of his deputies that he brought in to be the Education Minister. I understand he's a really good man also, so I think they've got some really good things going on.

Q: Well, you talk about there being quite a few of the Americans there working on education. How many were there altogether when you were there?

NELSON: In our office, there were the three of us. Besides me, there were two majors who were civil affairs officers. We had three Iraqi expatriates and a couple of translators who were Iraqi citizens. We had access to other military help from time to time. We were trying to access help back home on some of the thoughts about curriculum changes and textbook changes and all that. When we started into the process in Washington, we really thought we could take those people with us and work with them on the ground. It turned out, because of space issues and because it really wasn't time yet to have people on the ground working on those things, they didn't yet have somebody to work with on the Iraqi side. Those people had to be identified first. Now that has occurred, and I know the person that went and replaced Leslie at the end of the year -- and then I think may be back now; her name is Pam something -- I know she had lots of that kind of more detailed support than we had. When we got there, we were working on almost simple long-term things like the buildings, the pay, where are the buildings, how do we get student supplies to them this fall and how do we make sure we redistribute the test booklets so that kids and parents know how their students did on the various end-of-year exams? It was just pretty basic stuff, but it had to be done before you could take the next step.

Q: I gather a major accomplishment was getting the kids back in school. Is that right?

NELSON: Yes. Unfortunately, I came home before they started school, but I saw a few pictures afterwards and I think it was quite a celebration. They didn't start 'til October. They delayed for a while because basically we were a month behind on everything with the war having occurred, and we needed that time to renovate as many schools as we could. Obviously it wasn't perfect, but I think they got off to a good start. I don't know too much. I hope to see Leslie at the end of this month because I haven't really talked to her in detail since then.

Q: Leslie's last name is...?

NELSON: Arsh. In fact, she's back in Washington and has now stayed on at the Pentagon. She's helping with military family issues. I'm not sure exactly what department she's in; you ought to talk to her.

Q: Are there other major areas, or other areas, that we haven't touched on?

NELSON: I can't think of anything. We've pretty well summarized what I did those seven or eight weeks.

Lessons learned

Q: Let's turn to looking back over that experience and what you know about it. What would you say were the three, four or five major lessons that come out of your experience there if we were going to do it again?

NELSON: At least in my little limited piece of this pie, which was just dealing with education, I think we took the right steps for the most part. There were times when we disagreed with something USAID or the UN or some contractor wanted to do, but I think for the most part everybody realized that our purpose there was to support the Iraqis in their significant desire to get their education system back on its feet. There was just really not much debate about is this the right thing or wrong thing to do to make their schools better. Everybody agreed on that.

Now, they're going to have a lot of issues down the line about what's taught in the schools, how much religion is part of the school, the various language issues because you've got the Kurds in the north and that sort of thing. Our hope was that we would set-up processes so they would have ways to deal with those things in kind of concrete, consensus-building ways. Now, Doctor Alwan's strength, in my view from the limited time I was around him, was in bringing people together.

One of the problems there is they were always just told what to do. You didn't argue back, you didn't have opinions; you just did what you were told. So, it took a while with some of the mid-level people to get to the point where they would think kind of out loud about, "Do we really want to do this? Is this really the best thing for our country?" Once you started hearing that, you knew that progress was being made because they had been

suppressed to the point that they wouldn't do that.

Q: Were there any other lessons? I think you said you were setting up processes.

NELSON: I'll tell you, it was good for me personally, if I can personalize it for just a second. I've been involved in the American education system, mostly in Texas but also in some organizations around the country. We have our own failings, to say the least, but we are so, so fortunate, both in the quality of the instruction that our teachers give, the kind of people we have teaching, the quality of our buildings, the whole gamut of things. When you see what I saw in Sadr City, for example, or in Mosul, or when you see the very best secondary school in Arbil, one of the Kurdish provincial capitals, and find that in two filing cabinets is their library, you just realize that I need to appreciate and I need to help others appreciate more what we have here and to take advantage of the great opportunities. I hope that as time goes -- in fact, one of the things Leslie and I are talking about now is some interchange between some of the schools that we had contact with over there and some of the ones here -- now that I'm superintendent of a pretty good sized urban school district, we're talking about having some Iraqi educators come here. I would like our kids to be able to interact with their kids through the Internet, now that they're getting Internet service up again. It was just an invaluable learning experience for me. I'm glad I was asked, and I'm glad I got a chance to go, and I'm just really thankful.

View of Iraqis

Q: How did you find the Iraqis to work with?

NELSON: You know, without exception, the ones I met were pleasant and wanted to make it work. Now, obviously I wasn't around the bad guys, the ones that are causing the problems now. There were issues about how much religion are we going to have in our schools because they're obviously not going to be a secular-based public school system like we are. I just found it fascinating, absolutely fascinating.

Possible recommendations

Q: What would you -- maybe this is repeating -- say were some of the major recommendations you would make for moving the process forward?

NELSON: Well, I think getting the curriculum revised, getting better textbooks, focusing on teacher training, hopefully getting international support to build as many schools as fast as possible. They don't have to be fancy because anything they build is going to be better than what they've had. They still need hundreds, maybe thousands, of new facilities just to house the student population. What I didn't know really until I began studying it in Washington -- these numbers are pretty inexact because they're obviously not of our caliber -- is that their population is a little more than Texas and their student population is equal or greater than California's. So they have large families, they have lots of children. I think the best way we can democratize Iraq, or help them democratize themselves, not us democratize them, is through education. The kids need to grow up in a system in which they respect each other, they respect other people's rights, and in which they can disagree without fighting or worse. If there's one thing we can bring to

the table, I think it's that.

Q: How do you do that?

NELSON: You do it day-by-day, school-by-school, classroom-by-classroom.

Q: What kind of program?

NELSON: It's not something that's going to happen overnight, and anybody that suggests it can happen overnight is just wishful thinking. It's going to take a lot of work by a lot of people for a long time.

Q: What kind of programs would you suggest?

NELSON: I think having their leadership in the schools become familiar with what other countries in the region and outside the region are doing, whether it's in Europe, or Jordan has a pretty good education system. There are parts of the Egyptian system that aren't too bad, although some of the Egyptian methodology is "I'm the teacher and here's the lesson -- it's an "If you don't get it, it's your fault" kind of an attitude. At least that's what I've been told; I'm certainly no expert on that. I think interacting with others around the region and certainly the world would be helpful to them.

Q: Are there particular programs that you would...

NELSON: No, I don't know of particular programs that I would recommend.

Q: Is there anything else that we haven't covered?

NELSON: I can't think of it. You've pretty well covered my entire seven weeks in the capital of Iraq. One thing I can tell you, it was really hot in August.

Q: You were in the worst period.

NELSON: It was really hot, but that's okay. It's amazing how they.... I don't know if they were used to it, but they certainly knew how to deal with it. It was hot.

Q: How did it feel like living in that city there?

NELSON: We would check the temperature every day -- Iday -- I don't know where the temperature thing was -- and in August we had many days where it was over 120 Fahrenheit. You just stayed out of it, and I think that's what they did too.

Changing economy

Q: Was there businesses coming back in the city?

NELSON: Yes. You know, that was one of the really amazing things. This is just an

amateur analysis, but when I first got there, I guess about the second or third day we went over to the UNESCO or UNICEF office -- I've forgotten which -- and it was in part of the downtown area, so we left the safety of the Green Zone. The UN people came to pick us up in a bright blue UN SUV. There were lots of people milling around and walking around on the streets, but there wasn't much commerce going on. I will tell you I was a little anxious. Lots of people stared at you, but nothing happened. We got back, and over the course of the next few weeks when we would go out, almost every time you would notice more commercial activity. By the time I left, there were consumer goods everywhere. They would put them on the street, because it obviously never rained, and people would come along and they were buying washing machines and TVs. Of course, the most popular thing was cell phones because they had been banned. They didn't have a cell network, and companies were working hard to get that set-up. They just wanted to be able to communicate with each other, talk to their families and friends. I asked, "Where's all this stuff coming from?" and they said that every day truck after truck after truck was coming from Kuwait and Jordan bringing these consumer goods. There was a huge pent-up demand, and there was lots of commercial activity certainly by the time I left, and I'm sure that goes on today.

Q: Did you find the Iraqis were eager to find out about the rest of the world?

NELSON: Most of the ones I talked to were. They would ask you questions about schools over here and what do we do about this and what do we do about that. Because their religion is such a significant part of their daily life, maybe more than ours, they were amazed when they would say, "Do you teach Christianity in your schools?" or whatever and I'd say, "Well, not in the public schools; we separate," and they were pretty amazed about that. They were very curious, especially the ones that had been in Iraq, not the ones that came from outside that were Iraqi. Their sources of information were nil.