

A desire to help an unstable Iraq

In Baghdad, Americans see Iraq from a unique perspective

By Holly Noe
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"God damn, I did not sign up for this."

While not a particularly unusual reaction upon starting a new job, for those arriving to assume civilian posts with the U.S. government to help rebuild postwar Iraq, it just seems more fitting.

"They show you these horrific pictures, like, 'This is what it looks like when you get anthrax. So, don't get anthrax,'" added Joshua Volz, 27, a Michigan native who headed to Baghdad in February 2004 to work on the Oil for Food program with the Coalition Provisional Authority—Iraq's official government following the invasion, and the State Department, which later took over.

"And it's not just your average fly-in," said Jack Myers, 49, an assistant fire chief at Fort McCoy, Wis., who arrived at the same time for a six-month stay to help re-establish Iraq's fire services. "They spiral you into the airport in a C-130, because you're getting shot at."

Next, workers spend six weeks living in a tent with more than 100 others on the grounds of the Presidential Palace, Saddam Hussein's former residence that now houses the State Department and U.S. Embassy, inside Baghdad's Green Zone, a 4-square-mile secured area surrounded by 20-foot concrete walls. Workers then move into two-person trailers, fortified with sandbags to protect against nightly mortar and rocket attacks.

"Not to be melodramatic, but you went to bed not knowing if you'd wake up in the morning," Volz said via telephone from Baghdad. "If a mortar round were to come in, you're dead. There's no discussion, they're scraping you off the ceiling."

"It's definitely an experience, being confronted with your own mortality—at 26—on a daily basis," Volz added. "Some days it's easier than others. But I definitely didn't sign up for it, that's for sure."

Given the dangerous conditions and 75 to 90-hour workweeks, Volz said he was surprised how many of his peers did. "But then again, I don't know of many opportunities someone has to rebuild a nation," he said.

In Iraq, young people have been able to assume unprecedented positions of power, responsibility and influence. Volz found himself running a \$1.3 billion program, which he admitted he was not entirely prepared for, and interacting directly with Iraq's new leaders.

Everyone has a story of how they came to Iraq—be it by forwarded e-mail, a family

connection or a government help-wanted ad. From there, it is largely a matter of timing and matching skill sets with needed jobs.

The positions attract a diverse, aptly interesting crowd. Myers said he encountered colleagues enticed by a mix of career politics, the desire to help another country while serving one's own, thrill-seeking and, of course, money. Government employees draw their base pay, plus 50 percent for hazard pay and working overseas.

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Joshua Volz
U.S. State Department
Baghdad, Iraq

Workers who contract with private corporations and security firms make big, tax-free money—from \$80,000 to upwards of \$300,000 per year. Volz estimated contractors outnumber civilian workers three-to-one in the Green Zone. Basic services, from water to fuel, were contracted through Kellogg, Brown & Root, a subsidiary of Halliburton.

"Everything was Halliburton," Myers said. "Even the food."

"The sense of profiteering is difficult," Volz said. "It's harder to look an Iraqi colleague in the eye and say, 'I'm here to make your country better' when they know you make \$120,000 a year and they make \$800 a month."

"The money was a big attractant. I knew kids over there making \$750 a day," Myers said. "But a 35-cent bullet can take that all away."

Volz agreed the money alone does not justify the risk. He had a personal connection, having studied Middle Eastern politics and international affairs at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "I didn't want to see things get worse than they needed to be, I wanted to be part of the solution," Volz said.

"For me it had to do with the fact that I didn't agree with the war," Myers said. "We went over there and blew the crap out of them and totally dismantled their government. I felt that I was going over to help."

Still, the politics are unavoidable. Volz said being in Iraq was personally divisive. "I'm not one who thinks doing anything to help is reinforcing the Bush administration's strategy of plunder and war," he said, "yet I can't agree with this blind, 'let's reshape the world with democracy, share a Coke and a smile' kind of thing either."

Myers agreed. "It's a double-edged sword. My initial reaction to us going over there was: No. There are a lot of other tyrants that are worse than Saddam," he said. "But then I saw the atrocities that happened over there, and thought, yeah, OK, I'm glad we got rid of the bastard. But, we're not the world police—but yet it's like we are."

Both said they thought mistakes were made in planning for and handling post-conflict Iraq, and that correcting them is extraordinarily complicated.

"It's a 'chicken and egg' kind of question: How do you get security? You win the hearts and minds. How do you win the hearts and minds? Give them basic services like water and electricity," Volz said. "But when we send people out, they get killed."

Reconstruction is progressing in Iraq, but slowly. The security situation keeps Iraqis, the military and civilians from working together, while ongoing poverty fuels the insurgency.

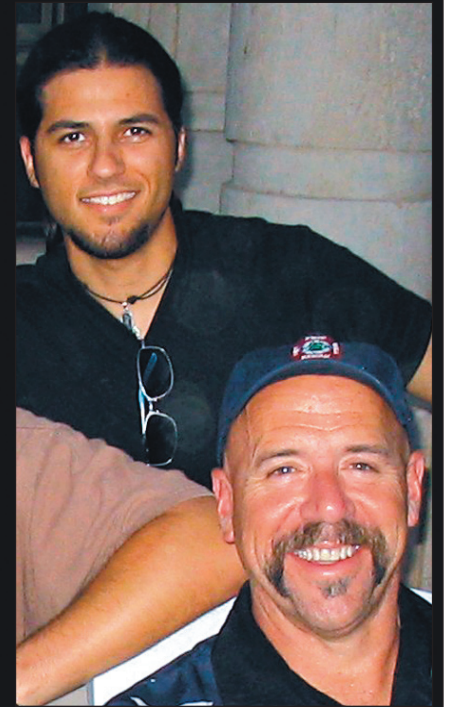
"When we go to a warehouse or fire station, we can't be there longer than 15 minutes. Insurgents will start focusing on it because Americans are there, and it will be attacked," Myers said. He recalled supplying the Iraqi fire department with 300 utility trucks, worth \$27 million, that Iraqis refused to drive because anything American is a target.

Both Myers and Volz said they knew Iraqis who were killed, in some cases along with their families, for working with them. "We always focus on the American deaths," Myers said. "Every time a bomb goes off and I hear 20 or 30 Iraqis were killed, all I can think about are my friends."

Volz said he is amazed at the resolve of his Iraqi colleagues who risk their lives by simply going to work each day. "I take those risks as well," he said, "but I have a choice, and at the end of the day I can walk away from this if I want to. But the Iraqi people that I work with, they don't have a choice, this is it for them."

Myers and Volz said everyone wants the United States out of Iraq, but agree the time is not now. "Without the American military in Iraq, it would be bedlam," Volz said.

Volz said he would like to see more



PHOTOS COURTESY JACK MYERS

Above: Jack Myers (front) and Joshua Volz relax by the palace pool during a celebration the State Department hosted for Memorial Day 2004.

Below: Lights illuminate the swimming pool outside the Presidential Palace in Baghdad, Iraq. The palace, formerly Saddam Hussein's official residence, now headquarters the U.S. Embassy and State Department.

candor from all parties involved concerning the Iraq commitment. "Democracy takes time. We've had, what, 250 years of it, and we're still struggling with it and what it means," he said.

Myers said he is considering going back to resume that struggle in Iraq. "It just felt like I left a job unfinished," he said. "But it's more dangerous now. It's not as fun as it used to be."

Volz plans to leave Iraq this summer and eventually study at Columbia University. But he—like the country he will return to—remains conflicted.

"As hard as life is here, it'll be tough to leave behind," Volz said. "I just feel I can be so much more effective by engaging the system and working within the structures of power that already exist."

"It's important that the voice of dissent is heard, but while you're dissenting, get up and make the situation better. The situation is what it is. You can light a candle, or curse the darkness."

