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Roots Of Hope In a Realm Of Fear

By Paul Wolfowitz

Behind the police academy in Baghdad stands the forked trunk of a dead tree, unusual for the fact that on each branch the bark is permanently marked by two sets of ropes -- one high enough to tie up a man, the other, a woman. Near the tree is a row of small cells where special prisoners were held.

Our guide, the newly appointed Sunni superintendent of the academy (who had spent a year in jail for having made a disparaging comment about Saddam Hussein to his best friend) told us of unspeakable things that once happened to men and women tied to that tree and held in those cells. Beyond the torture tree, a small gate leads to the Olympic Committee Headquarters, run by Uday Hussein, who would often slip through the back gate at night to torture and abuse prisoners.

Traveling throughout Iraq last week, I heard many more accounts of unspeakable brutality -- on a scale unimaginable for Americans. While we were in the north, one commander told us workers had temporarily stopped the excavation of a newly discovered mass gravesite, after unearthing the remains of 80 women and children -- some still with little dresses and toys.

In the south, we met other remnants of the regime's horrific brutality, the Marsh Arabs, for whom liberation came just in time to save a fragment of this ancient civilization. But for the Marsh Arabs, the marshes are no more. Where there was once a lush landscape of productive, freshwater marshes, there is now a vast, nearly lifeless void. The children there greeted us with loud applause and cheers of "Salaam Bush" and "Down with Saddam." Their first request was not for candy or toys. It was, instead, a single word: "Water?"

One of my strongest impressions is that fear of the old regime is still pervasive. A smothering blanket of apprehension and dread woven by 35 years of repression -- where even the smallest mistake could bring torture or death -- won't be cast off in a few weeks' time. Iraqis are understandably cautious. Until they are convinced that every remnant of Hussein's old regime is removed, and until a long and ghastly part of their history is overcome, that fear will remain. That history of atrocities and the punishment of those responsible are directly linked to our success in helping the Iraqi people build a free, secure and democratic future.

What happened to Uday and Qusay Hussein last week is essential to the process of building that future. Their demise is an important step in making Iraqis feel more secure that the Baathist tyranny will never return, in restoring order and in giving freedom a chance. Even in Baghdad, far from the Shi'a and Kurdish areas that we associate with

Hussein's genocidal murders, enthusiastic and prolonged celebrations over the news of their deaths erupted almost at once -- suggesting something else I observed: Hussein and his sons were equal-opportunity oppressors.

It was a significant step forward to get Nos. 2 and 3 on our most-wanted list of regime criminals. That same day we captured the commander of the Special Republican Guard. But we've learned in our days on the ground that the roots of that regime go deep -- burrowing into precincts and neighborhoods, like a huge gang of organized criminals. So it is the coalition's intensified focus on mid-level Baathists that we think will yield even greater results in apprehending the contract killers and dead-enders who now target our soldiers and our success. Recently captured functionaries have revealed new and helpful information, and we are working to encourage this trend.

Even though the enemy targets our success, we will win the peace. But we won't win it alone. We don't need American troops to guard every mile of electrical cable. The real center of gravity will come from the Iraqi people themselves -- they know who and where the criminals are. And they have the most at stake -- their future.

While Iraqis may remain in the grip of fear, our troops, our coalition allies and the new Iraqi national and local Iraqi councils are making significant progress in lessening its iron hold. When inevitable challenges and controversies arise, we should remember that most of the people of Iraq are deeply grateful for what our incredibly brave American and coalition forces have done to liberate them from Hussein's republic of fear.

When we've convinced Iraqis that we mean to stay until the old regime is crushed and its criminals are punished -- and that we are equally determined to give their country back to them -- they will know they can truly begin to build a government and society of, by and for the Iraqi people.

In many ways, the people of Iraq are like prisoners who endured years of solitary confinement -- without light, without peace, without much knowledge of the outside world. They have just emerged into the bright light of hope and fresh air of freedom. It may take a while for them to adjust to this new landscape free of torture trees.

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