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Candid analysis of the war

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With mainstream media coverage of Iraq too often dominated by accounts of suicide bombings and American soldier deaths unaccompanied by serious analysis of the larger war effort, it's refreshing to get thoughtful perspective on events on the ground -- particularly from someone without any evident political agenda. Such analysis has just appeared in a report by retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, a Vietnam combat veteran, division commander in the 1991 Operation Desert Storm campaign and President Clinton's antidrug czar, who believes that Iraq's security force has improved substantially compared to 18 months ago.

Since Operation Iraqi Freedom began, Gen. McCaffrey has at times been scathing in his analysis of the Bush administration's conduct of the war. But after visiting Iraq and Kuwait from April 13 through April 20, he believes that coalition forces are making substantial progress in training the Iraqis to defend their country against the the terrorist insurgency. Under Lt. Gen. Martin Dempsey, who oversees the training of Iraqi forces, the Iraqi Defense Ministry and Interior Ministry "have shown dramatic and rapid growth in capacity and competence." According to Gen. McCaffrey: "The Iraqi army is real, growing, and willing to fight. They now have lead action of a huge and rapidly expanding area and population."

Moreover, U.S. efforts to embed teams of seasoned American officers and noncommissioned officers to guide newly created battalions are working well. "This is simply a brilliant success story," Gen. McCaffrey wrote in an April 25 memo to his colleagues at West Point. At the same time, he emphasizes, it will require "at least two to five years of U.S. partnership and combat backup to get the Iraqi army ready to stand on its own. The interpersonal relationships between Iraqi army units and their U.S. trainers are very positive and genuine."

To be sure, Gen. McCaffrey is brutally candid about the serious problems that exist and the difficulties that lie ahead in creating Iraqi security forces that can function without substantial support from coalition forces. He notes that it will also require a major effort to reform Iraqi police forces, which were mired in corruption during Saddam's rule. According to Gen. McCaffrey, it will take 10 years to reform the police, which are distrusted by the Sunnis, and have been infiltrated by Shi'ite militias and hostile foreign forces.

Iraqi battalion-level forces, he writes, "are in many cases excellent. Most are adequate." But the forces lack such essentials as heavy machine guns, mortars, decent communications equipment, artillery and armor. Moreover, some serious problems lie ahead. These range from a shortage of reconstruction dollars to a rapidly growing animosity between U.S. military forces and American media organs they deem hostile to the war effort.

For all the difficulties, Gen. McCaffrey believes -- and we agree -- that U.S. forces can and will ultimately be successful in creating in Iraq "a viable federal state under the rule of law which does not: enslave its own people, threaten its neighbors, or produce weapons of mass destruction."