

Dispatch 8: The Eyes of the Children

Sunday, April 2, 2006



If you want the truth, look into the faces of the children. The children tell the story.

What you see when you look to the children is pure, unmitigated truth ... uncorrupted by the politics of a country driven by sectarian, tribal and countless other agendas.

The faces - and especially the eyes - of the children reveal chapter by chapter, verse by verse, the true story that has guided Iraq under Saddam's rule.

Young faces; old wizened eyes.

For the beholder, the eyes of the children mirror the world into which they've been born. A world of brutal and agonizing destitution ... of painful neglect ... of war and unrest. These kids didn't choose to come into a world ridden with strife. Cosmic chance or design placed them there.

Their length of experience is guided by what they wake up to and go to bed with every day of the week. It's what they see and hear on daily basis. Explosions, gunfire, armed insurgents, soldiers and the rumble of military vehicles passing through. It's a pounding on the door in the middle of the night. Masked faces, the bark of unknown, intimidating voices.

And there aren't words enough to capture and try to explain what is reflected in the eyes of Iraqi children. I can tell you it's a gut-wrenching, heartbreaking experience to witness the abject poverty that surrounds them. Mud huts, dirt floors, lice and ringworm. Rheumy, dulled eyes and runny noses. Deep, hacking coughs, hungry stomachs, worried looks, bewildered faces.

And like children everywhere, they have eager and curious minds. But in many cases, they're without benefit of a structured educational system. These are young minds that need to be nurtured and fed by reading and math. God only knows what hidden fruit, what talents, lie veiled and uncultivated in the children of Iraq.

If Iraq is to progress and finally come into its own as a nation - if it is going to have a future at all - that future lies with the next generation of its young people. The Iraqi children of today are what Iraq must be able to draw from if it's ever going to be able to develop in a meaningful way and take its place among the other nations of the world. Iraqis need to understand that their wealth isn't in their abundance of oil resources. Iraq's greatest treasure - its greatest resource - is its children.

The U.S. military has grasped that concept and the 3/320 F.A. has grabbed that ball and run with it. A big part - a huge part - of what they are striving to accomplish in their area of operations reflects that.

Besides mounting up and running missions looking for bad guys, caches of weapons and explosives; besides training members of the Iraqi Army, much of their time and limited resources are focused on changing the lives of the next generation of Iraqi citizens. As I've stated before, the military understands that winning isn't about body count, it's about winning hearts and minds.

But that's what you don't hear about back in the states. That's what isn't reported on the nightly news or in the morning paper.

And it's a shame.

And despite the many challenges of providing rudimentary change to the culture of deprivation that is ever present in Iraq's rural towns and villages, members of Bravo Battery, 445 Civil Affairs Battalion of the 3/320 F.A. are doing what needs to be done to win the hearts and minds of Iraqi citizens. And they're going balls-to-the-wall to accomplish it.

Working long, arduous hours, Captain Chris Ortega, Battery Commander of Bravo Battery, and his team are building schools, constructing hospitals and medical clinics, and bringing classrooms to the young people of Iraq.

They are initiating efforts to bring a logical method of banking to the country through the "Dinars to Dollars" program. Issuing and cashing paychecks are new concepts for the employers and working people of Iraq. Establishing some sort of reliable banking system will help grow the economy here and, by doing so, will raise the standard of living of the average Iraqi citizen.

Prosperity is relative. For most of us, it's measured by where we live, stock portfolios, what type of automobile we drive or annual income. Prosperity in Iraq can be measured in much simpler terms: having enough food to eat, adequate medicine and health care, running water or electricity.

Prosperity in Iraq can be measured by the children in Iraq whose lives will be forever changed - for the better - by the people of our military. People like Captain Chris Ortega or the countless other American "Joes" who are accomplishing what they set out to do.

And one day, there will be proof positive that what they are doing has won hearts and minds ...

that what they are accomplishing today did make a difference.

A nation and its people will be transformed forever by the service and sacrifice of people like those now serving in the 3/320 F.A., 101st Airborne Division.

One day, we'll be able to see the proof in the eyes of the children.