



Iraq's Democrats Look for Support From a Democracy

21st October 2004

A lot has happened since April -- to Iraq and to Spirit of America. We know the bad news. This column, however, will be animated by the same principle as the one in April -- hope.

Hope is justified, despite all one has seen and read about Iraq. Hope is justified because of the many Iraqis unseen and unwritten about. Jim Hake and his colleagues at Spirit of America have been working with these Iraqis since April. They have a new project, whose name, Friends of Democracy, was created by Iraqis who want to prepare their country for the idea and practice of democracy in the three month run-up to their January elections.

A quick update, though, on the initial SoA television project. All the equipment is in place. Two of the stations are operational and broadcasting original, local programming two to three hours daily. One did an account of another SoA project: women's sewing centers. Video excerpts are on the SoA Web site, spiritofamerica.net¹. But once the Marines became a target for insurgent attacks, they lowered their presence around the TV stations.

Help is on the way. Absent the Marines, the additional training for the station operators will be provided in the near future, outside Iraq and with SoA support, by someone familiar to readers of this column: Don North. The man who made the now-famous documentary about the Iraqi amputees who received prostheses in Houston this year is going back to train the remaining Al Anbar stations in TV production. (No U.S. network ever picked up Don North's documentary, by the way. But it's available now at rememberingsaddam.com².)

The Spirit of America's Iraq democracy project came together with a meeting several weeks ago in Amman, Jordan. The pro-freedom Iraqi bloggers at iraqthemodel.com came, and their delightful account of a first-ever trip beyond Iraq's borders is up as an Oct. 20 post at iraqthemodel.com³. Other Iraqis who attended have asked that their names not be published for obvious reasons. A woman who was reporting for Kurdish-run Al-Hurriya TV was gunned down last week in Baghdad. Still, all are willing to take personal risks to educate the Iraqi people about the meaning and purpose of democracy before that January election date.

In an e-mail days later to Kerry Dupont of Spirit of America, one wrote: "We are very serious in this dear Kerry and we truly hope we can serve our country the best at these crucial times. We also know that this work will make our friendship with the USA stronger as I believe that a democratic Iraq will be more inclined to make alliance with the free world."

To get the word out, the Friends of Democracy plans to use all available media. Plans so far include:

Documentaries. A new Iraqi NGO called Civic Pillar is acquiring, through friends in Holland, documentaries showing (with subtitles in Arabic) other nations' experience with new democracies. For example, "Milosevic: Bringing Down a Dictator" (made here in 2002 by Steve York with PBS station WETA).

Public service announcements. They are soliciting Iraqi celebrities (athletes, artists, authors, actors, poets) to do TV spots explaining what democracy means to them, or urging people to think beyond tribe or sect to the future of a new Iraq. A prime mover here is the new government's Minister of Women's Affairs, Narmin Othman. Though her annual budget is very small, she has contacts in the broadcasting community and wants SoA's help to create spots encouraging women to participate in the elections.

Relatedly a new initiative called the Iraqi Women's Educational Institute has begun the Women's Leadership Program, which will train 150 Iraqi women around the country in democracy-building skills. Spirit of America hopes to give each woman \$1,000 to kick-start their projects at home.

Via the Internet, the bloggers want to hook up 50 to 100 pro-democracy student groups around the country. Do such groups really exist? The bloggers insist they do. (And who knew before Tiananmen Square or Romania's Timisoara?) They also want to create a central Web site to share documents. Once identified, Spirit of America would like to acquire copiers and paper for all of them.

Other projects include citizen roundtables and townhall meetings, which will be taped and distributed to broadcast outlets around the country. They hope to get Iraqis used to the until-now alien idea of free speech and open debate. There are even plans for an Iraqi Federalist Papers. The idea here is to ask a group of Iraqi intellectuals to write on constitutionalism and the rule of law. They would publish a booklet, solicit responses, hold point-counterpoint debates and tape them for broadcast.

As in April, readers who wish to help the Spirit of America/Friends of Democracy project financially may do so through spiritofamerica.net or by calling 800-691-2209. The details on SoA's financial accounting for its projects to date are at <http://www.spiritofamerica.net/site/financials4>. "Our policy," says Mr. Hake, "is that in the event there is a surplus of funding for a project, we give people the option of reassigning their donation to other projects or getting a refund. That's what we did with the Marines/Al Anbar TV project, and 99.75% reassigned their donations."

From day one, Jim Hake has tried to run a nonpartisan organization, but I will ask an unavoidable, partisan question: What happens to these courageous Iraqi democrats if John Kerry wins, having called Iraq a "colossal mistake"? One way to dispel any confusion would be if Mr. Kerry and Teresa Heinz Kerry themselves made a contribution to Friends of Democracy. As in April, they would be in very good company, Republican and Democrat.

Tags