

# Return to Baghdad



*Written by Congressman Peter Hoekstra*

*On Monday, Sept. 8, 2003 Congressman Peter Hoekstra, a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, returned to Baghdad nearly one month after an initial visit to meet with lead scientist of the Iraqi Survey Group Dr. David Kay; Michigan State University President Peter McPherson, Financial Coordinator for Iraq; and James Haveman, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Health. In the following journal, Hoekstra shares his thoughts and photographs.*

**Monday, Sept. 8: Leave Washington Dulles International Airport for Chicago and then fly non-stop to Amman, Jordan.** Originally we were only to meet with Dr. David Kay, head of the Iraqi Survey Group, a team of 1,200 scientists tasked with unraveling former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's banned weapons programs, but shortly before we leave, the President indicates that he soon plans to submit a supplemental spending request to Congress for \$87 billion to fund the war and Iraq's reconstruction. This trip will allow for meetings with those who helped prepare the request.

I will also meet with Michigan State University President Peter McPherson, Financial Coordinator for Iraq, and former director of the Michigan Department of Community Health, James Haveman, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Health. They are both leaders in Michigan who are playing key roles in the reconstruction of Iraq.

**Tuesday, Sept. 9: Arrive in Amman, Jordan at 4:30 p.m.** The congressional delegation (CODEL) allows itself a brief time to adjust to the seven-hour time difference and eat a small dinner.

**Wednesday, Sept. 10: Return to Baghdad.** I am again in a C-130 transport plane on a two-hour flight into Baghdad International Airport. The airplane co-pilot is Nate Cook of Caledonia. Contrary to previous flights into Baghdad, Cook and the other pilots do not approach the airport runway in a tight spiral. Because they believe that the spiral approach creates an easier target, they prefer to drop in rapidly, hitting two steep, banked turns and then landing.

Once on the ground, we meet with Dr. Kay in one of the buildings in Hussein's "water-world" palace complex, an outrageous example of how Hussein spent his country's wealth on himself. Although I am not able to share much of what I learned because of the sensitive nature of our discussions, the meetings are conducted and the CODEL receives much more information than anticipated before returning to Amman.

**Thursday, Sept. 11: Meetings with Peter McPherson and James Haveman.** The helicopters are late so the CODEL drives into the headquarters of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), allowing a much better feel for Baghdad than a helicopter overflight.

Peter McPherson provides an update on what has been accomplished in Iraq's financial sector in the last few months. Decisions made early in the process have allowed banks to reopen and the fledgling financial system to begin operating. People who claimed that there was no plan for Iraq's economy could not have been more wrong. Key and



**Congressman Hoekstra pauses to pose for a photo with construction workers and staff at the Iraqi Ministry of Health as they discuss reconstruction efforts in Iraq.**

sometimes painful decisions were made, and many positive developments have occurred. The reconstruction team continued circulating the dinar (Iraqi currency) after defeating Hussein, despite the fact that it featured Hussein's picture. They did not want the currency to collapse, and when the banks opened they did not want a run on the money.

Foreign banks are now clamoring to get into Iraq, new currency will replace old currency in a few weeks, a donor conference will be held in October and the World Bank will allow Iraq to apply for loans within a month.



In many ways, it looks like Peter's team has averted a number of potential financial disasters. They continue to move forward on several other issues, including advising the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) on all aspects of financial governance, such as tax policy, investment (particularly foreign investment) rules and tariffs. Peter also strongly believes in the need for Congress to pass the supplemental appropriations bill, which will provide the resources necessary to continue rebuilding Iraq and the opportunity to create jobs for Iraqis.

The next stop is meeting with Jim Haveman and traveling to the Ministry of Health. This is the first opportunity to see downtown Baghdad from the ground. We are given a military escort for security purposes, but it is obvious that Baghdad is functioning. Shops are open, and people walk the streets. Although there are buildings leveled by the war, most surrounding structures incurred minor damage if any at all. Precision weapons hit precise targets. The Ministry of Health stands across the street from the old Defense Department complex. Yes, much of that is leveled.

The Ministry of Health is located in a pair of 11-story buildings – both looted down to the electrical outlets. In many respects, this is fine because even though this is a relatively new building, its construction was lousy. Less than two months later, the restoration of one building is nearly complete. On any given day, some 2,000 Iraqis are working in the building on health issues, and up to 300 contractors are working on restoration. Depending on one's perspective, much has been completed or much needs to be accomplished. This clearly is a case of the glass being half full or half empty.

Jim scheduled meetings with Iraqis such as contractors, doctors and patients, but he also encourages stopping and talking with anyone as we tour the headquarters and later a hospital. We spend an hour walking through the building and talking to people. These are construction workers, doctors and other staff working for and with the coalition.

These people are excited to be working, thankful that Hussein is gone, skeptical of the United Nations assuming control and proud of the results they are achieving. They also recognize that they are at risk; people working with the coalition are frequently targeted

by anti-coalition forces. They also recognize that it will be the Iraqis who will need to assume leadership and step up to the task regardless of personal risks they might face.



**Congressman Hoekstra greets a construction worker at the Iraqi Ministry of Health prior to discussing the rebuilding of Iraq.**

Their concern is understood. They feel genuinely threatened and are concerned about security within Baghdad and Iraq. One construction worker even said that we need to punish criminals more harshly. The looters too often are released quickly and with little or no punishment. He states: “This encourages them to continue their lawlessness and entices others into crime because they see that crime pays.”

Jim speaks confidently about his team’s successes. Epidemic diseases were averted (the transition team had been concerned about outbreaks of cholera or malaria among many possible outbreaks), the hospitals remained

open with little looting, 10,000 tons of pharmaceuticals have been distributed and the salaries paid to doctors have increased significantly. Jim also recognizes that much more needs to be done, and he has created a plan for accomplishing it. The team wants to distribute health care more equitably throughout Iraq. During Hussein’s rule, most of the country’s resources were focused on Baghdad and the area immediately north.

We visit a children’s hospital in which little or no investment has been made since 1979. A number of patients and their parents are visited. There is a first-time father showing off his new baby, and there are several mothers with very sick children. They express hope that the coalition is creating a brighter future for their children. One says: “It is in God’s hands.” Some of the children are very ill – one in the latter stages of liver failure. The delivery of improved health care will improve coalition standing with the Iraqi people.

**Friday, Sept. 12: Depart hotel at 4 a.m. Flight leaves Amman at 5:45 a.m. for Istanbul, Turkey, then Air Turkey flight non-stop to Chicago.** The debate now seems to be about whether an adequate plan existed for Iraq’s reconstruction. About 10 days into the war, people said the war plan was poor. Ten days later Baghdad was captured and the traditional war was essentially over. In many ways the reconstruction effort is the same. The team has a plan, although much of its success has been overlooked. They are working hard under some very difficult circumstances.

I am looking forward to Saturday: A public town hall meeting in Holland and then a meeting with families of service men and women. I plan to show them video I filmed of the progress being made in Iraq. I expect they will be surprised.

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