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PRIMARY SOURCE

Sir Nigel Sheinwald speaks

The incoming British ambassador to the United States speaks with the editorial board about Iraq, Europe, Africa and more.

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British Ambassador Designate to the United States Sir Nigel Sheinwald stopped in to talk with the editorial board. Some highlights:

Iraq: Long and complicated drawdown

Jim Newton: What, uh, what is your assessment of the British experience in its withdrawal from Iraq at this point, and are there lessons for the United States to take from the experience, that you are somewhat further along in this process than we are and would like to be?

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: I think there are some -- the main thing to remember is that we're part of a single campaign, and that we're able to ... to move ahead a little bit more quickly [in the south on]...the basic idea, which is that as security improves, um and as conditions stabilize, so coalition forces can come down in numbers. And that's something which we aspire to in the center of the country and which we've been able to implement gradually in the south.

But um, when you look at specifics, the fact is the south is very different. The southeast, where we are and where we've been since the spring of '03, the problems there have been uh, have been intra-Shia. Um and the violence certainly -- the vast majority of the violence over the past few years -- has been directed at coalition forces: some Intra-shia, but mostly they're militias acting against the U.K., Danes and others in that area. So [it's] fundamentally different from the rest of the country, where you've had, really, the ... conflict between Shia and Sunni on the one hand, and activity by al-Qaida and the militant Sunni groups on the other. You have very, very little--not now, but very, very little of that in the southeast.

So the main factors which have spurred the violence and which have threatened stability in the center of Iraq really haven't been the factors in the southeast. And what's happened -- we haven't withdrawn, we've reduced our numbers -- we're now down to about four and a half thousand and we'll be down to about two and a half thousand into the spring of next year.

And since we moved out of the city center in the summer of this year, the violence against us has really come right down. There are only a handful of dissidents that remain, which sort of proved our point, really, that to some extent it was the patrolling and so on which drew fire to ourselves. In other words, you have to try and create the right political [and] economic conditions, and we're doing that as well. Trying to pump some uh, some [aid] in the economic development of the southeast, which has not been easy, but which we're still trying to do. But basically, so far, this progressive drawdown has been a success and I think it's gone well.

Jim Newton: Are there--

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: And we'll be able, I hope, in a few weeks time ... we should be able, formally, to transfer responsibility for security in the Basra province -- the last of the four provinces to do this, that we're in charge of -- formally transfer authority to the Iraqis.

Jim Newton: Looking beyond that part of the country to the rest of Iraq, are you optimistic that there's sufficient prospects for stability, that a larger drawdown of troops could be underway next year?

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: ... I'm sure that, you know, to be able to do this you need better security conditions and you need some confidence that the politics and economics will start to settle down and be more productive as well. Um, and it's certainly the case that ... the surge in U.S. forces this year have created calmer conditions, thankfully, for your forces and for the Iraqis--but not yet produced a transformation politically, which your government and all the rest of us would very much like to see.

So I think you need to look at both to, you know, if you're going to determine the speed of the drawdown. I think -- one thing I think your commanders have said, their hope is that in 2008 there will be some -- some reduction in forces will be possible, if this military situation goes on as it is.

Tim Cavanaugh: How confident are you in the local authorities to whom you are turning over power? In southeast Iraq?

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: ...I think it will never -- that part of Iraq, certainly not for decades, be like any part of this country or my country. They're -- you've got to accept that this is, you know, their country, and accept their conditions and their way of doing things to a large extent. Um, so, you've got to try and think of this in the right mental frame. But yes, I'm reasonably -- reasonably -- confident that they can develop a way of life there which is economically successful and which allows representative government to be sustained.

I don't think -- I think they are Iraqis, not Iranians, although Iran is a very present factor in that part of Iraq but I think that they are Iraqis, I think that there will be the involvement of militias and so on -- for the time being, will be at a higher level than we would ever tolerate in our society. It's there, it's part of Iraqi society, it will take some time for Iraqi you know society to develop in a free way after all those decades of repression. That's one [thing] we keep having to come back to: that we're not dealing with a country that was a rose garden when the when we, when the initial conflict took place four and a half years ago, so um, so there are things we'll work through.

But we've had a lot of contact with people down there who, you know, who have aims for their part of Iraq, similar to many local politicians in this country or in mine. And gradually, as the security calms down, I think that those people will, will come through. It'll be a very -- a complicated and torturous route.

American shift on climate change and Africa

Dan Turner: Um, you know, you could argue that we're still not spending enough but, certainly under President Bush, aid to Africa has increased enormously.... How much of a role did Tony Blair have in that?

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: Well, I think he had a role because, you know ...when ... Tony Blair came back from his summer holidays in 2003 and announced to all of us that he wants Africa and climate change to be the two subjects for his G8 presidency ... in 2005, and we had lots of discussions about it... We knew it was going to be difficult internationally.

Climate change has proved to be a continuing bone of contention between most of the international community and the United States administration, and Africa. Actually the problem has been less with the the levels of debate in this country as with some of our European partners in getting the levels of international aid up.

But of course, you know, we did have to persuade the White House to get as far as we did.... I think President Bush said this himself. He believes they've taken, as you say, Africa policy and aid levels further than any previous administration. So there's been a good deal of work on that including at the last G8 summit ... I expect that will continue next year as well.

American isolationism

Jim Newton: Is the United States more isolated today in the world than it was eight years ago?

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: um...I think the world is a much more complicated place than eight years ago, so it's difficult for me to answer that. If the world -- If nothing had changed very much, if it was a world that was recognizable, the world of eight years ago, it would be easy to answer that question.

But of course, the world's been through a number of really, really, genuinely major convulsions and those of us who deal with this professionally have to acknowledge that. I mean, we have a lot more on our plate today. The world's a much more difficult place. Nothing was simple in '99 or 2000, but it seems like a much more complicated place and a more difficult set of problems to resolve than it did then.

And as for, um, isolation or whatever, I think the important thing today is not to measure that, but to measure more the fact that in -- over the last two or three years and in President Bush's second term, a much greater effort has been made to close in with your European and other allies.

Go back to Iran. Iran is, in a way, the test case for the second, this president's administration, and on that, this administration -- everyone has been totally online with your European partners' approach.... So I would say

actually there's a bit of a chance for greater cooperation and greater U.S. engagement in the international community than there was, say, at the time of the Iraq conflict -- where undoubtedly there was a division, but I don't think isolation. If you look at Europe in 2003 -- I was working as ambassador to [the] European Union during that period -- It wasn't easy, [an] easy time to explain exactly what we were doing, but neither was it impossible. Because in the European Union, it wasn't that it was the U.K. against the rest. The European Union was absolutely, remember, split down the middle in favor of the war, with the U.K., Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, most of central Europe, against ... Germany, France, Belgium Luxembourg, Greece -- but that doesn't add up, to me, to isolation. It adds up to a fractured, uncertain, divided international community. But one which, I think, now is coming together a lot more in looking at the issues we face -- Iran, Israel, Palestine, even Iraq, I think ... I think that people are prepared to move on.

Eurengland?

Jim Newton: Can we talk about one more?

Tim Cavanaugh: Uh, relation with Europe: When are we going to see the UK using the Euro? I mean actually, both currencies are so high right now... [laughter]

Sir Nigel Sheinwald: I don't think the U.K. entry into the Euro is on the political agenda or on the economic agenda. It's certainly served us economically to have stayed out over the past -- what is it, ten years or so now -- and we haven't suffered for it economically. It's been better for us, so we're staying out. And politically, that's not on the agenda.

Um, so [I] don't think that's really the issue. The issue is more, what's going to happen in Europe now that ... we've agreed the new treaty that will be signed in Lisbon in a few days' time, and that's provided our sort of political base. Can Europe now -- that'll be the question we put -- can Europe now move on to some practical projects in the future? ... keeping European trade open is very important to us, just as, you know, assuring that the atmosphere here doesn't become protectionist -- that's incredibly important to the U.K. and one area where we look very closely at the presidential debate, to see the way the candidates are speaking on these issues. So there are, you know -- we want Europe to be ... the UK's always wanted to be ... active in world affairs but open and liberal in its trade and economic policies. And moving on from the -- sometimes -- sterile political debates that Europe has gone into.

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