

A view of Iraqi successes: Burdin Hickok will talk about his experiences on March 10

Written by Susan Wolf



Burdin Hickok, senior member of the diplomatic team of the Kirkuk Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) talks about his experience. —Thomas Nash photo

Burdin Hickok experienced a side of Iraq few people know about, and came away knowing he had a role in that country's first steps toward economic development and democracy. He will share his experiences on Saturday, March 10, at the Mark Twain Library.

"It was an incredible experience," said Mr. Hickok at his Redding home. A wall is filled with mementos of his three years in Kirkuk Province — from April 2008 until April 2011 — where he worked for the U.S. Department of State as the senior member of the diplomatic team of the Kirkuk Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). These teams are civilian-led organizations that partnered with the U.S. military and Iraqi provincial governments.

"Our mission was to create a sustainable, stable, democratic Iraq with a free market economy capable of re-entering the global economy," Mr. Hickok said about his job. "There was no manual."

"It was hot, dusty, very different than the West," he said of Iraq. "You have to move away from the Western mindset to be effective."

It was not hard for him, said Mr. Hickok, because he studied international politics and international political economy in grad school. "You have to avoid cultural imperialism," he said.

The team

Mr. Hickok, who had a 20-plus year career in global capital markets, led and managed a team of 20 professionals, which included economic and development subject matter experts, as well as U.S. Army officers. He was a direct hire of the State Department and, as such, carried a diplomatic passport.

"The State Department realized it didn't have the subject matter expertise to accomplish the mission," which is why professionals from the private sector were hired, said Mr. Hickok.

"We could not have done what we did without the military," said Mr. Hickok. "They were invaluable in supporting the civilian effort and understood that we were critical to their success as well. "

Mr. Hickok described Iraq "as an emerging democracy in a bad neighborhood," referring to neighboring Iran and Syria. Unlike most of Iraq, the Kirkuk Province is made up of a majority of Kurdish population with significant, Arab, Turkmen and Christian minorities. One of the biggest challenges, he said, was to deal with the Kurd-Arab conflict in addition to all the other factors typically considered in the PRT's economic initiatives.

Three years

Initially hired for just one year in Iraq, Mr. Hickok ended up staying for two more, leaving about the time the work of the PRTs was winding down. During his tenure in Iraq, he got a break "pretty much every three months or so," so he could come back to his home and family in Redding.

While working in Kirkuk for the State Department, Burdin Hickok, briefed dignitaries like Vice President Joe Biden.

He was recognized as the lead spokesperson for U.S. development efforts in Kirkuk, and regularly conducted economic briefings at the highest levels of U.S. government presence in Iraq. He met with, among others, Vice President Joe Biden, who told Mr. Hickok, "You have an impossible job."

While in Iraq, Mr. Hickok lived in a "containerized housing unit (CHU)," which was much like a mobile home. It contained a bedroom, bathroom and shower. "We were very fortunate compared to other PRTs," he said, noting their members, generally, had no bathroom facilities inside their units.

Military attire

Each morning and many evenings when he left his "home" on the military base outside Kirkuk to go to work, a helmet, eye protection, and an armored vest were Mr. Hickok's attire. He traveled to work in a military convoy, which was always a battle-ready full military squad.

"In my three years there we regularly took rocket fire. Fortunately, casualties on the base from these rockets were rare," said Mr. Hickok. Despite this, Mr. Hickok and his colleagues would get out and talk to Iraqis every day, working with the provincial council members, meeting with farmers, and occasionally walking through markets, he said. On the weekends, he would go to a tribal or party leader's house. He was always accompanied by an interpreter, who he described "as invaluable to us." Over the course of his three-year tour of duty, Mr. Hickok was involved in more than 600 movements outside the wire.

"Generally, once we arrived at our destination, we would remove our body armor and conduct business much like you would at home. At times we would walk around a market talking to merchants about their businesses," Mr. Hickok said. Although the information was anecdotal, he said, it would give him "a better sense of what the economy was like. Any official data was unreliable, and data was pretty much non-existent," he said.

No credit system

Mr. Hickok was hired as a senior banking and finance adviser to help rebuild Iraq's banking system. He quickly discovered that all banking was highly centralized out of Baghdad and there was no working credit system. The banks only accepted deposits, and didn't make loans. His PRT tried to reintroduce credit into the local economy by establishing "micro finance institutions; places where small loans of \$500 and \$1,000 could be made to local people. The U.S. government financed these loans. Mr. Hickok added, "These institutions were very successful in Kirkuk."



Mr. Hickok is shown wearing his protective gear.

In the Iraqi economy, "a \$500 loan is huge," said Mr. Hickok. These loans were intended for the everyday worker and citizen and could be used to fix up a home or to run a business, which adds to the overall economy," he said.

Eventually the earnings from the loans paid for overhead and increased the money available to more businesses. "This cycle of a self-funding lending business creates sustainability," said Mr. Hickok. "We focused on sustainability every time we did any development program."

According to Mr. Hickok, "In every project, we intended to accomplish three outcomes: to address a vital need of the community, to ensure Iraqis worked with us from the beginning through to the end, and to transfer our skills and knowledge to the greatest extent possible. We were teaching through example, building Iraqi capacity to implement programs and projects once the U.S. was gone. We were trying to build self-sustainability.

"Prior to 2008, ensuring Iraqi buy-in of reconstruction or development projects was not necessarily a focus. The Kirkuk PRT was a leader in changing U.S. mindset to focus on Iraqi development priorities."

To do "country building," Mr. Hickok said, you need to create an effective infrastructure and a functional government "to support a democratic form of government. Only the Iraqis can build their nation. We're essentially trying to guide Iraq out of 30-plus years of communist government."

Much of Mr. Hickok's job was to manage the subject matter experts and to make their efforts successful.

Agriculture

If oil is taken out of the picture, he said, 80% to 90% of the economic activity in Kirkuk is in agriculture. When he arrived, Mr. Hickok said, it was the second year of a four-year drought, so his agriculture experts focused on irrigation projects, as well as other basic infrastructure programs. He made sure the government ministry and farmers worked together so each had a stake in the project. In fact, in all of his PRT's projects, Mr. Hickok used this approach.

Mr. Hickok walks with his Iraqi interpreter, Jim Vancura, senior agriculture advisor, and Akrum Diawana, director general of silos in Kirkuk.



Another PRT project, "hoop houses" (greenhouses), were also reintroduced. These enhanced the farmers' ability to substitute Iranian imports with locally grown produce. "We tried to reintroduce technology the farmers had lost due to the war, sanctions, lack of investment, and looting," he said.

The PRT also renovated a grain silo that was operating significantly below capacity, which had a negative impact on farmers and sheep herders. The PRT worked with the Ministry of Trade, which ran the silo, and the Ministry of Agriculture, and taught them how to get bids for design and work.

"We had oversight of the bank and the money, and for the next year oversaw the renovation of the facility," said Mr. Hickok. In exchange for the renovation, the trade ministry agreed to bring in a hydraulic lift for the silo, which aided the farmers in selling their grain. Again, it was a successful project that involved all stakeholders.

The PRT team's women's entrepreneurial initiative to teach Iraqi women how to create, market and run a small business was another success. The program was started by an Army captain on his team, said Mr. Hickok.

Under this initiative, after successfully completing a training program the women applied for micro loans and were given small grants through the U.S. Army in addition to putting in their own money. To start their businesses, such as beauty shops or other cottage industries, the women learned basic business skills. Nine women successfully completed the first training program and all of their businesses were up and running when Mr. Hickok left. One of these women had even started a second business, and the training program has been expanded to include an additional 60 women. "It was extremely cutting edge for this environment," Mr. Hickok said.

During his three years in Kirkuk, Mr. Hickok said his team "successfully designed and implemented over \$100 million in development assistance."

His experience working with the subject matter experts on his team "was very rewarding," he said. "All of the people on my team were volunteers. All made sacrifices to be there in a war zone."

He also had praise for the military. The soldiers he worked with "were phenomenal, competent, and intelligent. We would not have been successful without their support and contributions." he said.

Afraid?

Speaking about his experience, Mr. Hickok said he was never afraid, but admitted that when he first got to Iraq, everything was new, including the food and the sight and sound of gunfire, plus he was away from home. "Once I was settled in, I didn't worry about my safety. There were 5,000 soldiers around me."

Before he arrived in Iraq, Mr. Hickok received three weeks of training at the State Department. "The training was quite effective, because I don't recall any surprises when I got to Baghdad," he said.

Highlights?

Asked about the highlight of his experience in Iraq, Mr. Hickok said it would be easier to say what he didn't like: Being 6,500 miles away from home, the heat, the dust, and the memorial services. "There were many of them and each was heartbreaking," he said of the soldiers' services.

One of the things Mr. Hickok least liked was attending memorial services for the soldiers. This is a wall with the names of the fallen.

Mr. Hickok, home since last April, is the recipient of the State Department's Superior Honor Award, its second highest award, for his "sustained, outstanding performance." He also received the Expeditionary Service Award.

Mr. Hickok will talk about some of his team's successes in a presentation entitled, "Planting Seeds of Hope: Stories of U.S. Success in Iraq" on Saturday, March 10, at 5:30 at the Mark Twain Library.

The Redding Republican Town Committee is sponsoring this non-political event, which includes a wine and cheese reception. This event is free and open to the public. Space is limited.

