

Sooner in Baghdad

The concept of free elections is virtually unknown in countries where Darren Nance has worked for the last dozen years, but Iraq presented the ultimate challenge.

BY MICHAEL WATERS



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Darren Nance is not an excitable guy. He speaks calmly about his efforts to organize and monitor elections in such combustible places as Central America, Kosovo, and, since late 2003, Iraq. His conversational language is that of a white-collar administrator, sprinkled with the terminology one might find in the research reports he has helped draft on behalf of international democracy-building organizations that have employed him for the past dozen years.

But when the subject turns to voting itself, and how much it means to the ordinary people of emerging democracies, Nance's voice trembles with enthusiasm. So it does when he talks about January 30, 2005, the date of Iraq's first election in the post-Saddam Hussein era. Nance lent a hand in organizing the historic event and was among those who kept tabs on what was happening from a fortified headquarters inside Baghdad's Green Zone, as eight-and-a-half million Iraqis braved the threat of bombs and mortars to cast ballots nationwide.

"Early on, a suicide bomber hit one of the polling stations," he recalls. "We asked the Iraqi officials in charge whether we should shut the station down. The Iraqis said adamantly, 'No, no, no!' The people waiting at the polling station helped clear the area, cared for the injured and then went back to vote.

"I realized at that point it was going to be an incredible day. And it gives me goose bumps talking about it."

The day was long in coming. In Iraq since September 2003, Nance has immersed himself in the gritty details of building a post-Saddam democracy. While he says he is "not the biggest fan on how we got here," he has labored hard to make Iraq's democratic transition a success—in a number of jobs with two U.S.-supported nongovernmental organizations, IFES (known formerly by its full name as the International Foundation for Election Systems) and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

NDI is also where the story of Darren Nance's career begins.

It goes back to when Nance was an OU undergraduate, double-majoring in Spanish and Intercultural Communication. The combination reflected the young man's varied experience and emerging desire to work in the international arena.

"I had participated in a couple of cultural exchange programs in mid-high school, which triggered my interest in international affairs," he says. "Then, in high school I got accepted as an exchange student to the Dominican Republic. I lived in a small town with a family who didn't speak English. It was sink-or-swim. It's amazing how quickly you learn when nobody else can speak English."

After finishing his junior year at OU, Nance heard about NDI's work—programs that promoted political party development, election observation and civil society enhancement in young democracies. He wanted in, and although it was past the deadline for summer internships, he wrangled a few weeks as an unpaid intern. NDI was so impressed with his work that they granted him back pay. By summer's end, they offered him a job upon graduation.

As graduation neared, Nance accepted NDI's offer, taking finals early so he could hurry off to the Dominican Republic to

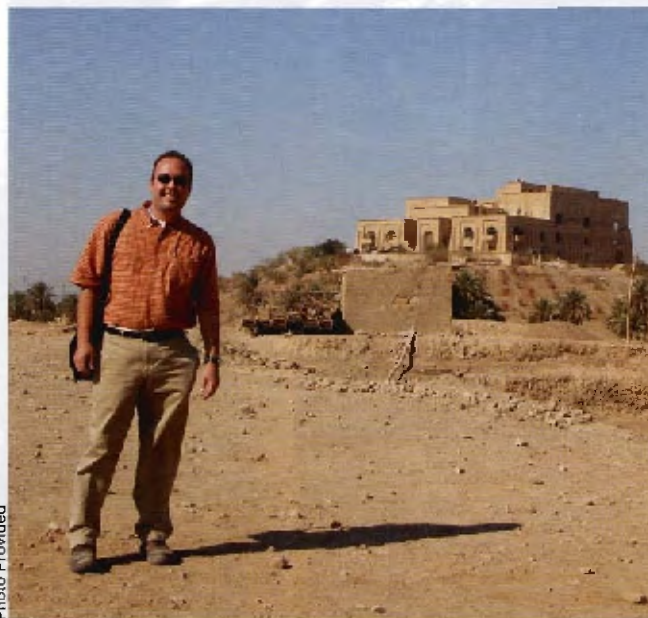


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In Babylon, Iraq, Nance stands in front of one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, a four-story edifice near the Euphrates River that extends across an area as large as five football fields. The palace later served as a military encampment for Western troops.

serve with an NDI election observation team. He learned quickly that in this line of work "you're expected to perform miracles"—for instance, insuring on short notice that observation teams have transport and accommodations for ground trips. Beyond such nuts-and-bolts issues, Nance spoke with hundreds of Dominicans, working to instill voter confidence that the international team was "watching to make sure there was no funny business going on."

Those confidence-boosting talks sometimes placed the young graduate in tough spots. Deployed on election day to Comendador, a city on the Haitian border where the campaign had been especially contentious, Nance found himself asked by authorities to address a crowd who were "ready to riot" outside the municipal election commission building. "So all of a sudden," he says, "I'm standing on top of a table outdoors with a bullhorn, telling people their concerns were being heard and reported upon."

Such reassurances worked in Comendador and nationwide. In the wake of observer-reported abuses, the Dominican government agreed to hold new elections in 1996, and Nance served there again as the field director for the NDI/Carter Center monitoring effort.

Over the next four years Nance helped start NDI voter education and political party training programs in Guatemala and El Salvador. In 1998 he signed on with the Organization of American States (OAS) as an election observations coordinator, working with missions assigned to campaigns in Ecuador and Venezuela. It was great experience, but Nance was building a résumé that he says pigeonholed him as a "Latin Americanist." He began looking to branch out.

The opportunity came in 2000, when Nance traveled to the war-ravaged territory of Kosovo, seized from Serbia by NATO troops and since governed as a United Nations protectorate. Working as Chief of Staff for Election Operations on behalf of the



Robert Taylor

Darren Nance relaxes by the Gimeno Fountain, just west of Adams Hall, during a recent tour of the OU campus. Nance was in Oklahoma visiting relatives during a break from his job as principal administrative officer for the international organization providing security advice and operational assistance to Iraq's fledgling election system.

Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, Nance helped organize Kosovo's municipal elections that year and a national ballot the following year. This was a new challenge. "In Kosovo it went from observing the election management body to *being* the election management body. We had over a thousand internationals running the election." In 2002 he did similar work for displaced voters in nearby Podgorica, Serbia and Montenegro.

All this turned out to be a curtain raiser for Nance's biggest job of all.

He had just finished serving on a six-month observation mission to the Arab republic of Yemen in mid-2003, when "I was asked by my old boss in Kosovo if I wanted to go to Iraq to do an election assessment. A small team was put together to make that happen." Working under IFES, Nance was asked to prepare two reports for the U.S.-backed Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), detailing how soon a nationwide election could be held in the shattered society.

The tasks were incredibly daunting. What could function as a voter registry in a nation whose government had ceased to exist? How could some 36,000 polling stations be organized and operate simultaneously over a 10-hour period, serving 15 million potential voters in a nation almost the size of France? Could the ballots be ordered, secured, collected, transported and counted efficiently? Could enough poll managers be trained? How would a fair count be insured? How much would it cost? Was

it worth the attempt, in a country that had almost no acquaintance with competitive elections?

Even in the best circumstances, Nance points out, "a vast amount of logistical and operational preparations go into an election so that it happens freely, fairly and transparently." And this was, arguably, the *worst* of circumstances.

Further, the team knew this task would be complicated by the Wild West environment of the new Iraq. And finally, while the UN would have been the logical choice to oversee democratic elections, the agency all but pulled out of the country after an August 2003 terrorist attack.

Remarkably, most of these problems were solved in just over a year. The UN returned in 2004 and established a mission to assist the newly founded Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq—a nine-member, multi-ethnic body whose eight Iraqi members did yeoman work organizing an ambitious 2005 election calendar. Meanwhile, Nance and his colleagues adapted



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Although Nance enjoys the wide array of ethnic cuisine that comes with serving in a variety of foreign lands, he satisfies cravings for "Oklahoma-grown" dishes in favorite college haunts like The Mont whenever he is in Norman.

a Saddam-era registry, used for the UN's Oil for Food program, as a makeshift voter list.

Nance shifted his focus temporarily in Baghdad in 2004, working as NDI's chief of operations to create local training programs for political party and civil society development. Then he was picked as Chief of Operations for IFES's share of the UN effort to assist the electoral commission. Finally, in the spring of 2005, he was chosen as the principal administrative officer for IFES's Iraq project.

While handling this range of jobs, Nance got used to working in one of the world's most dangerous environments, which in the months ahead grew even more unstable.



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Nance and colleagues take advantage of some downtime at a restaurant in the International Zone of Baghdad. The International Zone (formerly known as the Green Zone) is the heavily guarded diplomatic/government area in central Baghdad where U.S. occupation authorities live and work.

“Initially we went to restaurants in Baghdad, something you wouldn’t have dreamed of doing later,” he says. “But from the start, we had a private security company contracted for our life support. Outside of Baghdad our travel would become a coalition force-supported mission. For instance, for a trip to Mosul, I went by chopper, and on the ground there would be Humvees—a whole entourage. The military knew where we were going, how to get there and what the contingencies were.”

But the safety provided by coalition military and private guards cannot shield an international worker from the toll such an environment takes on one’s nerves. “Sometimes you hear a ‘boom,’ and you know a bomb went off. It’s weird in the sense that it becomes *normal*. You realize people just died or were injured. You’re in a small part of that big city, a part that’s ultra-protected. But you still hear the bombs and the mortar attacks. There’s no

question that insurgents would get into the Green Zone with car bombs, if they could. That’s something you live with.”

Even in private moments, he says, there are scares, though they can turn out to be something other than a threat.

“At home we’re in a secured street with protection and access control, and we live with our security detail. Things are pretty casual. Then one evening, suddenly there was a *lot* of gunfire—consistent, all over the place. You could hear bullets hitting the roof, and you think, ‘This is it. The Green Zone’s under a full scale attack.’ Our security was putting on their gear, and they had us huddle in one area. We’re thinking, ‘When will the military get here?’ ”

The reason for the outburst, it turned out, was that “the Iraqi national soccer team had beat Saudi Arabia.”

On the other hand, Nance notes that ordinary Iraqis, who do not have the benefit of private security, show an escalating impatience with the violence. “They’re frustrated. They don’t want to go back to Saddam, but they think twice about doing ordinary things, like going to the market, for fear of suicide bombers. I’ve heard a fair share of, ‘When is this going to get better? What do we have to do?’ They just want this to end.”

Yet as the security situation deteriorated throughout 2004, plans for Iraq’s transition to democracy got on track. The electoral commission planned an initial round of balloting in early 2005 to choose a transitional assembly. Working in an office at the electoral commission’s headquarters, Nance assisted



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Nance took on the monumental task of setting up an election system for some 15 million potential voters in post-Saddam Iraq. Boxes of counted ballots were stored until final certification of the December 15, 2005, election results.



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During his six-month observation mission in Yemen in mid-2003, out of respect for the local culture, Nance daily wore a Thooob. This typical dress of Yemeni men includes a belt holding a Jambia, the knife that each male carries.

catastrophe than for what actually happened,” Nance says. Yet although there were some reports of violence on election day, “it cooled off and got kind of . . . boring. And then you got these reports of people turning out in big numbers.”

A total of 58 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the January election, according to the electoral commission. That is a greater percentage of voter involvement than in any U.S. presidential election since 1968—and the numbers improved in two follow-up elections. When Iraqis voted on their proposed constitution in an October referendum, 63 percent of voters took part. After passage of the constitution, about 80 percent turned out in December to choose a new parliament.

One reason for the improved turnout was that, after Iraq’s Shia and Kurdish voters turned out

massively in January, many Sunnis decided their boycott of that earlier vote was a mistake. That led to a breathtaking turnaround in some Sunni-dominated areas such as Al Anbar province, where voter turnout jumped 800-fold between the January and December elections.

All of this bolsters Nance in his work. Even though Iraq’s security continued to deteriorate throughout 2005, he sees the elections as “the one constant positive” that continues to stir hope for the nation’s future. He believes that final success in building an Iraqi democracy would be a well-earned triumph for its men and women, in particular the brave individuals of the electoral commission—and thousands of others who have served in support jobs.

“The election commissioners are risking their lives to do what they’re doing,” Nance says. “Some of them were in exile abroad and came back specifically to help Iraq do this—realizing that they were putting themselves and their families in harm’s way. And there’s a lot of middle management and junior staff, of any ministry in Iraq, who come through those gates into the Green Zone every day and are clearly targeted for doing so.”

Their examples fuel the work that continues today. Nance is still in Baghdad, nearly three years hence. His team’s latest project involves helping prepare a permanent voter registration database. That might be accomplished in the context of a national identity card, although such a decision awaits the judgment of Iraq’s permanent government, formed in mid-May. A new, constitutionally mandated High Commission for Elections will replace the interim electoral commission, although its duties are unspecified until the new government says



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Public information flyers adorn the walls behind Nance’s desk in the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI). Distributed throughout Iraq, these flyers informed Iraqis voters of the election process.

with all sorts of operational and logistical tasks—from crisis management planning and liaison work with the U.S. military and Iraqi police to legal issues and the graphic design of the ballot.

Nance notes, however, that while a thousand international workers ran the Kosovo election, the UN assistance team in Iraq consisted of “forty-two people, tops.” Iraqi election officials deserve all the credit for making the election a success, he maintains.

That success was widely viewed in advance as a looming debacle. “I think everyone, even us, was more prepared for



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Discussing election preparations at the office of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) are, from left, Darren Nance, Director of Operations Ali A-Abdul, Chief Electoral Officer Adil Mohammed Al-Lami and Deputy Chief Electoral Officer Harith M. Hassan.

what those duties are.

Meanwhile, Nance plans to phase out his Iraq mission soon. “Three years is a long time in Iraq. As other colleagues have gone, they’ve make comments in their departing speeches, along the lines of, ‘I’ve seen many things come and go in Iraq, but one thing remains consistent—Darren’s still here!’ And friends remind me, ‘Darren, you’ve been in Iraq for a twelfth of your life.’ *That* freaks me out a little bit.”

But this international worker, who has already labored in 11 different countries over a 12-year career, wants to keep seeking new horizons. He thinks he might like to serve in Africa next. Or, he muses, it would be great to return to Latin America, since he misses “having that personal connection you have with people by speaking their language.”

Wherever Darren Nance goes, he will continue to work as a salesman, builder and contractor for democracy. He does not talk much about his work in terms that suggest faith or high idealism, but he is plainly optimistic about the future of democracy worldwide. And his efforts to educate and instill confidence in democratic processes are ultimately a type of peace work.

For, as Abraham Lincoln said, “Ballots are the rightful, and peaceful, successor to bullets.” And every ballot that Nance and his colleagues help empower could mean one less bullet used to settle a political dispute. That would be high service to a world in which, tragically, the latter continues to outpoll the former. 🇺🇸

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Nance enjoys hiking in the mountainous region of Montenegro. He served as chief of staff for election operations for the organization that helped prepare Kosovo for municipal and national balloting after the territory became a U.N. protectorate in 2000.