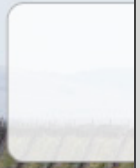




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## Former ambassador: No crystal ball for Iraq's future

**Whitman College graduate Ryan Crocker told a crowd to expect slow progress.**

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**By MARTIN SURRIDGE for the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin**

WALLA WALLA -- After 38 years of diplomatic service, recently retired Ambassador Ryan Crocker said Tuesday he's pleased to return to Eastern Washington where, at least for the time being, his plans are to have no plans.

"It's great to be back," he said. "The atmosphere here is more relaxed than most of America or even the rest of the world."

After a lengthy and often dangerous career in foreign service -- Crocker was inside the American embassy in Lebanon when it was destroyed by a car bomb in 1983 -- enthusiasm for relaxation is quite understandable.

In a public discussion at Whitman College with history professor David Schmitz, Crocker stressed the importance of a bipartisan, proactive approach to the conflict in Iraq.

"It doesn't matter if you were for the war or against the war," Crocker said. "It's how we manage the engagement going forward."

Crocker, who graduated from Whitman College in 1971, was the nation's top diplomat to Iraq for two years. He played an instrumental part in the negotiation of the 2008 security agreement, a joint contract between the governments of the United States and Iraq, which mandated that troops withdraw from the country by 2011.

He sought to allay worry over some of the potentially controversial issues that surround the security agreement, including a potential scenario in which conditions in Iraq deteriorate as the deadline for withdrawal approaches.

"The fundamental principle is that of Iraqi sovereignty," Crocker said. "We will only be there as long as the Iraqi government wants us there. It's their country, we will not be the ones making their decisions."

Crocker was careful to avoid long-range predictions, but expects the conflict in Iraq could extend longer than the scheduled withdrawal date, "Who can say where we will be in 2011?" he asked. "The landscape could change dramatically."

The presence of troops in the region has been a point of international contention since the invasion in 2003, but Crocker explained that American efforts in Iraq are capable of producing much more than short-term peace.

"The military provides the platform to move forward in political and diplomatic relations as well as assist in Iraq's reintroduction into the region."

Prior to his posting in Iraq, Crocker was the chief American diplomat in Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon, and explained that when progress is made in the Middle East, it is often painfully slow.

"We're six years into the new Iraq. It's been a very long time for Americans but it's still the beginning of the story," said Crocker. "When I arrived in 2007, just when the surge was getting under way, the odds were stacked against a trend of stability, but the degree of commitment Iraqis have shown in bringing their country to a better place gives me some encouragement for the future."

Crocker spent much of the evening discussing the potential for a successful democratic government in Iraq, one which he believes could benefit from a vibrant, diverse and efficient political culture.

"The question is not whether there will be problems and division in Iraq," he said, "but how they will be managed."

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