

Transcript of “By the People part 1”

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[Bill Kelly/Reporting] A random phone call from By the People and a polling organization brought these residents of central Nebraska to the UNK campus and Cairo and Hastings and right here in Kearney. Study materials provided background material on the issues that they would discuss today. They broke into small groups for much of the day’s discussion, gathering around a table where a painting contractor from Gothenberg, a minister from Holdrege, farmers from Minden and Grand Island, and a United Way manager from Cairo. Moderator Jackie Harms led the discussion as they started hashing out the most important issues facing America and the world. Iraq dominated their debate and opinions were as diverse as their backgrounds.

[Kurt Metzger/Drilling Contractor, Lexington, NE] These planes that flew into the Trade Center Towers, the people on them weren’t from Iraq, I mean why would their—that’s what I’d like to know, why we’re there. I mean he justified it—Bush justified going over there by for weapons of mass destruction. Where are they at? And well, at the same time, when he was doing this, we had Korea who geographically is closer to the United States than Iraq is. Say yeah, we got nuclear technology, so what? And we’re over there instead of—Explain it to me. I mean I—I’d really like to know the real reason why.

[James Albers/Farmer, Minden, NE] Uh the deal with weapons of mass destruction, you know they didn’t fine em. Like we was talking earlier, they was there. I believe in my own heart that they was there.

[Marie Nguyen] Would we be in Iraq today if the events of 911 had not happened?

[Metzger] Yeah I think he used the grief of this nation from 911 for attacking Iraq. Because it’s not Bin Ladin, that’s why.

[Nguyen] I agree with you. I think that there was a wave of emotion, you know, when those events happened, it was like you’re not gonna come here and do this to us and so I had that feeling too that maybe there was he used that wave of emotion.

[Randy Stueven/Farmer, Grand Island, NE] It doesn’t matter. What matters is the course of events that took place. The reality of the situation. The reality of the situation that we wouldn’t had had to deal with Bin Ladin had Bill Clinton been—went ahead and took him when he was offered. The reality of the situation is we wouldn’t uh had to deal with with Sadam Hussain had the first Bush not backed off because of public pressure to get out. We abandoned it. It was very similar to what happened in Viet Nam. We left. We left a void that was filled by tyrants.

[Nguyen] You quoted Saddam Hussain as to say, you know, if you come over here, we will enlist our weapons of mass destruction. He’s the bully on the playground and it is exactly as Mark states. Reality is perception. But we are being perceived as the bully on the playground or we would have never been attacked like that. So what are we doing as a country? What are we doing that is allowing that perception?

[Jill Jorgenson/Painting Contractor, Gothenburg, NE] I think we had to take a proactive stance with Saddam. I mean, I can't imagine the backlashing had there been weapons of mass destruction. Had they been used, you know, then we'd all be doing the finger pointing and I think it's a little too late to say, well we shouldn't have. We shouldn't have. Well, what can we do now to help rebuild and to move forward than to spend so much time and energy on saying well that was the wrong thing to do. Well, it's done.

[Harms] Do you struggle with us being in Iraq?

[Joyce Olsen/Farwell, NE] Yes, at times. I wonder how—when are we going to be done over there? You know, how much do we have to do before our soldiers can finally come home. You know, what we're doing now, trying to get them, you know, to have their own leaders, you know, that is going in the right direction.

[Harms] Do you think it should be democracy that we're trying to instill—that form of government?

[Olsen] I think we can teach them how to run their country from good things that we do. But then, on the other hand, sometimes you look at the way that they have been brought up and what they have been used to and then you think, will that ever happen?

[Jorgenson] We can't financially and otherwise stay and hold their hand until it goes just like we want it to because it's never gonna be that way. Because they're not the same country that we are. And I think we need to give them the tools and then whatever they choose to do with them is up to them.

[Stueven] If we just expose em to freedom, they'll search and find their own democracy that works, but it's the freedom. The people need to be free. They yearn to be free. It's within your soul.

[Trudy Greene/Retired, Gothenburg, NE] I don't think those people over there even understood what freedom was.

[Stueven] They will now.

[Marc Alfeno/Minister, Holdrege, NE] After the Civil War when they made the Emancipation Proclamation, a lot of the slaves didn't know how to handle freedom because the only thing that they ever knew was slavery and work. And so even though we may offer them a sense of democracy, it may have to be a hybrid democracy. It may not be democracy with capitalism. It may be something that's esoteric to their culture, to their people, to their ways, that they're gonna have to develop in their own area. And I don't think that we can impose our framework on their culture. They're gonna have to re-invent their own form of democracy.

[Kelly] The discussions were just as lively in the other groups participating in By The People. That afternoon, they gathered together with the questions raised during their small group

discussions. On hand with the answers were two members of Congress and leading academic and government experts.

[Mark Johnson, Wood River, NE] Our question is how do we increase our international credibility after finding no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

[Rep. Tom Osborne/3rd District] I don't know that we ever completely recover the high ground in this regard. And in talking to people over there, they say, you know, if you took the state of Texas and if there's a chemical and biological weapons, you might not need more than a few suitcases to have the weaponry to wipe out hundreds of thousands of people, so how do you find two or three or four suitcases in the state of Texas? Easier said than done. And so we may say well, we gotta find weapons of mass destruction, but as far as I was concerned from having been there and have seen what he did, I would say just what he did with the money that belonged to the Iraqi people was probably grounds for going in there, if nothing else.

[Rep. Doug Bereuter/1st District] In fact, there is a credibility problem. It's unfortunate that it is grown to the point that it exists today internationally. And that I think relates to some things that were handled not as well as they should have been handled. If the administration had admitted ahead of time that they thought that the total chemical weapon stock was about a hundred thousand metric tons to four hundred thousand metric tons, that would have been good to put before the American people in the world ahead of time because that was the estimate. And that sounds like a huge amount doesn't it. But actually, a hundred thousand metric tons can be stored in an average family swimming pool. The whole world community thought that there were biological weapon stocks and that the programs had been restarted in Iraq. It wasn't just the United States. Sadam Hussain had showed his willingness to use weapons of mass destruction, chemical weapons, against both Iran and against his own Kurdish population. And explaining even yet today how difficult it is and to find biological or chemical weapons I think would help restore some of the credibility that undoubtedly has been lost.

[Jessy Dunning] Going back to the security, is democracy promotion Iraq a realistic goal? And who should be leading the effort? Should it be the U.S.? The U.N.? Or the Iraqi people?

[Prof. Andrew Wedemen/UNL Political Science] That's a tough question. It's a very complicated situation in that if you make one group happy, you're likely to make other groups unhappy. I think the bottom line is that all three of those—the United States, the U.N., and the Iraqis themselves have to work together. You cannot impose democracy. Democracy at the point of a gun doesn't seem or seems to be something of a contradiction. Of course the problem for the United States is we're square in the middle and whoever is rendered unhappy by the process is going to blame the United States.

[Prof. Patrice McMahan, UNL Political Science] I think that what the United States could do and should do in Iraq in terms of democracy promotion is to emphasize strengthening civil society, which is grassroots kind of from the bottom up. And that's what happened in eastern Europe. I mean essentially you're in the form of Soviet Union. Another way of doing democracy promotion, which is a lot longer process and there are lot more questions involved is to provide support for local organizations whether they be women's groups, youth organizations,

educational facilities to provide research and then have the local people over time provide kind of that bottom up way of telling people--their representatives—what kind of political system they want.

[Bereuter] I think it would be a sad day if an American ever suggested that there's some part of the world that wouldn't want a democracy. Although most of them don't know what it is in many cases. But every human heart yearns for freedom. We would be criticized if we tried to impose it on our model. Most Americans are not likely to think that would work, but sometimes our actions suggest there's only one way of achieving democracy, which of course is in error. I think we need to go about it with energy and resources, but also with modesty.

[Kelly] If the discussions about Iraq were spirited, the By The People poll of Nebraskans showed substantial support for U.S. policy. Sixty-one per cent agreed the cost and loss of life will be worth it in Iraq, nearly twice the level of support shown nationally. Nebraskans were split on whether the United States should invade other countries posing an immediate threat without international support. The near unanimous opinion of those on hand in Kearney taking the time to be better informed and discussing the policies provided a much deeper understanding of how complex these issues can be for America and the world. In Kearney, I'm Bill Kelly.