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Strong Turnout by Iraqi Voters and Relative Calm Contradict Many Journalists' Pessimistic Predictions

Election Triumph Belies Network Naysayers

On Monday's *Early Show*, CBS's Dan Rather was ebullient. "This is an inspiring story and this is a joyful place today. Iraqis awoke today with a glint, a sparkle of freedom in their eyes," Rather exulted one day after millions of Iraqis voted in a free democratic election. "Even some areas influenced most by Sunni insurgents had a solid turnout yesterday," Rather noted. "The insurgents have suffered a significant setback."

Rather was right to be cheered by Sunday's events, but if the Iraqis had listened to the chorus of negativity coming from reporters in the days and weeks before the vote, he might not have had any good news to report. Pessimistic journalists suggested the election would be worthless and dangerous: Too few would vote to make the results "legitimate" while at the same time an army of terrorists would create a "bloodbath."

■ **Election Might "Demolish" Iraq:** On his syndicated *Chris Matthews Show* this weekend, the openly anti-war MSNBC anchor comically suggested that the election might destroy Iraq. In a show taped before voting began, Matthews set up the topic: "Birth of a nation — will elections unite Iraq or ignite civil war? Will this weekend's vote create a country or demolish it?...For Iraqis, a moment teeming with risk and potential: liberation or devastation."

■ **A "Bloodbath" on Sunday:** FNC war reporter Steve Harrigan, who spent most of the last two years in Iraq, was deeply pessimistic in a Friday morning appearance on *Fox & Friends*. "I think there's going to be a bloodbath on Sunday," he predicted. "All over the place, especially in Baghdad and a few other cities, Mosul....About half the country's in big trouble." NBC's Matt Lauer hit the same theme as he began that morning's *Today*: "Bloody countdown. Amid growing violence, will Iraq be able to hold its first free elections in more than 50 years?"

■ **"No Way" Election Can Happen:** Two months ago, some reporters suggested that the plan for holding elections on January 30 was an optimistic fantasy. On the November 26 *Today*, NBC's Katie Couric said elections "seem to be really questionable at this point in time." A few days later, on the December 5 *Evening News*, weekend anchor Mika Brzezinski declared that the situation in Iraq "seems only to worsen as election day gets closer and closer....Some are now saying there is no way the election deadline can be met."

Who Knew Democracy Was So Popular?

"The prospect is you can have five percent — in cities like Mosul, the prospect is five percent of Iraqis might turn out to vote....If you have a turnout of five percent in cities like Mosul, this is not a legitimate election." — BBC reporter Katty Kay on the syndicated *Chris Matthews Show*, December 12, 2004.

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"In the mixed Arab and Kurdish city of Mosul, turnout was better than expected in what has been a hostile place. Extra ballots had to be brought in." — Richard Engel on the January 30 *NBC Nightly News*.

■ **...And No Legitimacy:** Reporters argued the vote would mean nothing if the minority Sunnis stayed home. "If nearly a quarter of the population does not participate," ABC's David Wright wondered on *World News Tonight* January 5, "will the vote be legitimate?" And anyone predicting a high

participation rate was labeled an "optimist," i.e., unrealistic. "Election officials optimistically predict a 50 percent voter turnout," reporter Kimberly Dozier announced on CBS's *Early Show* January 25. In fact, the turnout was much higher, with early estimates that 60 percent of Iraqis voted.

■ **Jennings Still Unsatisfied:** On Sunday's *World News Tonight*, ABC's Peter Jennings seemed less than impressed. "It seemed a strange way to experience the democratic process, from the back of a heavily-armored vehicle," he grumped. In "parts of the Sunni Muslim heartland, it looks as if the election process has been rejected," Jennings sourly suggested. "Without Sunni participation, somehow, the future here is still pretty bleak." — *Rich Noyes*

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