

Personal agendas cause friction between U.S., Iraqi council

By Robert H. Reid
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Personal agendas, ethnic rivalries and differences over visions for a new Iraq are responsible for American dissatisfaction with Washington's own creation — the Iraqi Governing Council.

Frustration over the U.S.-appointed council has emerged at a time of escalating attacks by Iraqi insurgents, most recently the truck bombing Wednesday of the headquarters of the Italian Carabinieri police in the southern city of Nasiriyah.

Heavy-handed moves against the 25-seat Governing Council also could be seen by the already distrustful Iraqi public as a sign that the Americans aren't serious about granting Iraqis a meaningful role in their own affairs.

Entifadh Qanbar, spokesman for council member Ahmed Chalabi, said the complaints against the body were "nonsense and baseless."

"The Governing Council should not alone bear the responsibility of any inefficiency," Mahmoud Othman, a Sunni Kurd member of the council, told The Associated Press. "This is supposed to be a partnership based on equality, but when the Americans want to find solution for their problems, they do it in any way that suits them."

L. Paul Bremer, the chief civilian administrator

for Iraq, was summoned unexpectedly from Baghdad to a White House meeting Tuesday with Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and other key officials.

Bush administration officials acknowledged concerns about the council's progress since its installation in July but said President Bush was not about to disband it.

"The notion that we are about to throw the council to the wolves is exaggerated," a senior administration official said on condition of anonymity. "But there is a need to put some energy into the political transition. It is true they are not as together as we had hoped."

Apart from policy differences, the very composition of the council discourages quick decision-making. To reflect the diversity of Iraqi society, the council includes 13 Shiites, five Kurds, five Sunnis, one Christian and one Turkman.

Mouwafak al-Rabii, a Shiite Muslim member of the Governing Council and a longtime human rights activist, angrily rejected criticism of the council's performance, saying it is facing complex issues.

"We need to negotiate and have a dialogue to reach a decision," he told AP. "And when we do that, then we shall have to talk with our (coalition) partners, differ, negotiate and compromise with them."

Suspicion of America's intentions in Iraq was heightened when Washington persuaded Turkey

to send troops to join the coalition — despite widespread public opposition to a Turkish role. The Turks withdrew the offer after strong opposition by the Governing Council, which in turn angered Washington.

Tensions between the coalition and the Governing Council have been simmering for months. Coalition officials complained privately about the slow pace of decision-making and seeming indifference of some members to attend meetings.

Those sentiments have sharpened as the Dec. 15 deadline approaches for the Iraqis to submit a plan to the U.N. Security Council for drafting a new constitution and holding national elections.

Under the current U.S. plan, those are necessary steps for the United States to transfer sovereignty to a democratically elected Iraqi government.

The major stumbling block has been the insistence by the country's leading Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani, that delegates be selected by a general election — which U.S. officials fear could delay completing the constitution for more than a year.

Some coalition officials also suspect that the council is stalling on taking a decision, hoping pressure from Washington will force Bremer to grant sovereignty ahead of schedule to show progress toward a legitimate Iraqi government.

Key council members also have been pressing

Iraqi Governing Council

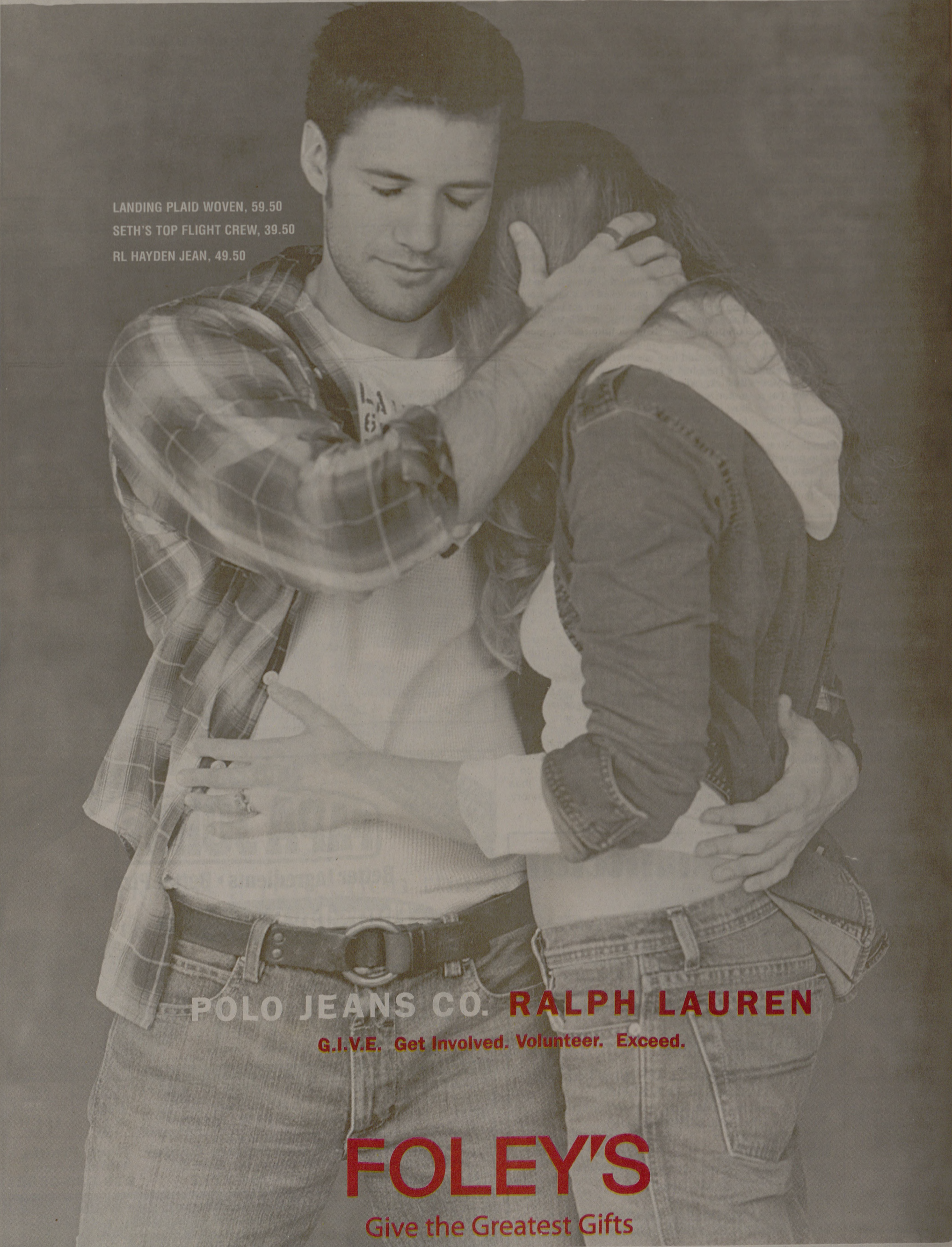
Conflicting interest, ethnic rivalries and differences over vision for a new Iraq have led to American frustration with Iraq's Governing Council at a time of escalating violence.



SOURCE: Associated Press

Bremer for months to approve a new, Iraqi-led military force to fight the insurgents. Bremer insisted on strict standards and coalition control.

U.S. officials fear that without such control the force could commit human rights violations and be used to eliminate political rivals under cover of counterinsurgency.



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