

The Daily Progress/Brady Wolfe

Col. W. Patrick Lang, a retired senior officer with U.S. military intelligence and the U.S. Army Special Forces, says that group interest holds a stronger position than personal interest in

the Muslim world. Lang, the first professor to teach Arabic at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, spoke at the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia.

Middle East expert warns of fragmentation in Iraq

By AARON KESSLER
Daily Progress staff writer

Col. W. Patrick Lang was cleaning one of his guns the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, sitting by his gun safe, when he first heard the news.

"I watched the scene unfold on television, and then saw the other plane hit the second tower," Lang said. "There was no doubt after that: We were under attack."

Five years later, Lang, a retired senior officer with U.S. military intelligence and the U.S. Army Special Forces, and one of the military's top specialists on the Middle East, said he doesn't think the nation's leaders have made much progress in understanding the nature of the Islamic world.

"The idea that you can send some well-meaning people around the world to convince Muslims to be more like people from Iowa, it's a little absurd," Lang told a crowd at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs on Monday. "That's just not how it works over there."

Lang was the first professor to teach Arabic at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and has extensively studied Islamic history and philosophy. He said the nature of Islamic practice is somewhat

fragmented, with no clear religious authorities as there are in, say, the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, Muslims coalesce around particular scholars or clerics and form a consensus about what is valid Islamic practice.

"To distinguish your group, one way of doing this is to say you are practicing the true faith, while others are not true Muslims," he said. "And if we're talking about the Sunni and Shia split, this has been going on for centuries."

For much of that time the Shia were treated as second-class citizens in the Muslim world. Now, with the chance to finally rule in Iraq as the majority, the tables have turned, and it should not be surprising that sectarian violence has broken out.

"If it's not a civil war, I don't know what is," Lang said.

Lang said the war in Iraq, though well-meaning, showed a certain lack of historical perspective on the part of the U.S. administration.

"In essence, we took off the capstone of coercion that kept all these factions from fighting with each other," he said. "And so now they're getting into it to determine who will rule the day."

President Bush and other administration officials have main-

tained that Iraq had a history of supporting terrorism and posed a serious threat to the United States.

Removing Saddam Hussein, they have suggested, was a key to preventing future acts of terror, though they now acknowledge that Saddam did not possess stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S. government, Lang said, would like to see a revolution in the Middle East that gets people thinking in terms of their individual interests rather than their group interests. But that can be a difficult prospect for a culture that holds the group in such high regard.

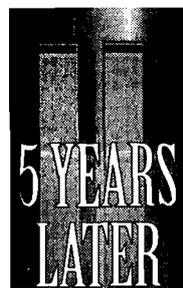
"So for example you can hold elections, but most people are going to stay with their group and vote that way," he said.

He said in his opinion Iraq will ultimately have to be partitioned into several different states.

The rise in Shia power is even more noticeable in terms of Iran, which Lang said is moving to position itself as the major power in the Middle East.

"They want to be the big dog, there's no doubt," he said.

Contact Aaron Kessler at (434) 964-5476 or akesler@dailyprogress.com.



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On sectarian violence
in Iraq