

PREPARED STATEMENT OF GEORGE CHARCHALIS
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

June 17, 2008

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

My name is George Charchalis. I am an American citizen, a lifelong resident of Nevada, and a veteran of the Korean War, where I saw combat with the Third Infantry Division.

Following my discharge in 1953, I completed my studies at the Utah State University, then embarked on a career in city planning and management, and ultimately established my own consulting business. In 1989, I was recruited by Kuwait's Institute of Scientific Research, which hired me to manage an ambitious plan to install parks, gardens, fountains and freeway landscaping throughout that country. After selling my consulting business, I moved to Kuwait with my wife and commenced what turned out to be the most rewarding work I had ever done.

That work, however, came to an abrupt end when the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait on the morning of August 2, 1990. Within hours, Iraqi troops were swarming all over our neighborhood and, over the next few days, we began hearing horrifying reports of Iraqi atrocities, including rape, torture and summary executions.

The Iraqi army soon set up an operational headquarters on the beach just across from our apartment complex and, with each passing day, the fighting got closer to us. Explosions and bombing became a terrifying concern. Several of the windows in our flat were shot out by machinegun fire. Scared to death, my wife and I huddled together in the basement, piling mattresses around us for protection as we struggled to sleep at night.

In mid-August, we learned that Saddam Hussein had issued an edict to his security forces to round up all American citizens in Kuwait, so that he could use them as "human shields" to deter the United States from bombing Iraqi strategic sites. Worried that they would come to get us, we moved to the basement of a Kuwaiti friend and then to a safe-house where another American citizen was already hiding out.

We lived in a state of constant anxiety and fear, knowing that the Iraqi soldiers could storm through the door at any moment. We struggled to keep our spirits up, but the stress, tedium, confinement and uncertainty played havoc with our emotions. Worst of all was my feeling of utter helplessness that I could do nothing to protect my wife or comfort our daughters at home who I knew would be worrying themselves sick.

Fortunately, in early September, Saddam was shamed into allowing the release of women and children. Saying good-bye to my wife, knowing that I might never see her again, was the most heartbreaking thing I have ever done.

Two days later, the moment I had feared most finally came. Iraqi soldiers kicked down the door of the flat where I was hiding. They struck me in the face with a rifle butt, knocked me down on to the ground, and kicked me mercilessly in the stomach. One of those kicks broke an abdominal hernia that had been repaired prior to my departure for Kuwait. In addition, I sustained a dislocated denture, a bleeding gash over my eye that left me with a nasty scar, a bruised tailbone that has led to a disintegrated disc and given me pain ever since, and the loss of hearing in my ear. I was in terrible pain and feared for my life.

I was taken to an underground car park, where I was made to stand against a wall. I was convinced that I was about to be shot, but after arguing about my passport, my Iraqi captors loaded me back into their car and took me to a Kuwaiti police station.

I was held overnight in a hot, fetid cell with my hands tied behind my back. Throughout the night, I could hear the terrifying screams of my fellow prisoners and wondered when my turn would come. The next morning, I was taken to a hotel and then herded onto a bus with a number of other hostages. After being taken to Baghdad, we were put on another bus and driven northward for most of the night until we arrived at a huge chemical complex near Samarra.

The next three months were almost like a living hell. We were housed in dilapidated huts that had long ago served as the living quarters for the workers who had constructed the facility. They were infested with rats, roaches and desert biting flies. Apart from an hour or so each day when we would be allowed to walk outside for exercise, we were confined to these awful huts almost around the clock.

The kitchen was disgustingly unsanitary, the water was foul, and what meager food we were given was totally unappetizing. We all developed skin sores and I suffered from chronic diarrhea, which became so debilitating that I had to be hospitalized. I was afflicted by numerous other physical ailments as well, including a very bad skin rash, and continued to struggle with pain from my ruptured hernia. By the time of my release, I had lost more than 20 pounds and was just a shell of my former self.

The stress was almost unbearable. We were surrounded by armed guards and the creepy sense of being watched every minute made me feel like a caged animal. We lived with the constant knowledge that at any moment we could be executed or killed in a bombing raid. If necessary, however, we were prepared to die for our country and, when the Iraqis tried to pressure me to go on television to denounce my president and my country, I told them to “go to hell.”

I soon began succumbing to anxiety attacks, developed chronic hand tremors and lost my ability to concentrate to the point that I could barely read a page. I suffered from insomnia that left me in a state of perpetual fatigue. When I did manage to sleep, I would often awake to terrible nightmares of being hunted down and tortured. As the weeks wore on, I became totally distraught, feeling as if my captivity would last forever and wondering how much longer I would be able to maintain my grip on reality.

Finally, on December 2, my nightmare came to an end when I was placed on a list of hostages to be evacuated with Muhammad Ali, who had come to Iraq on a humanitarian mission. Upon returning to the States, I was hospitalized for several days, while I received treatment for my hernia and internal bleeding.

In the months following my release, I was plagued by intense anxiety attacks and had flashbacks of being captured and beaten. I was unable to recover my appetite and suffered from recurring bouts of depression, which plague me to this day. I had great difficulty concentrating and was forced to retire at what should have been the height of my career. I have an exaggerated startle response to loud noises and grind my teeth so hard when I sleep that I am forced to wear a mouthpiece. I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and am still haunted by painful memories of my ordeal in captivity.

Today, 18 years after that ordeal, I am deeply saddened and bitterly disappointed at the treatment I have received from my own government and, in particular, the Department of State. I believe that the Department bears at least some of the responsibility for my plight, having assured me and many other Americans who had contacted the U.S. Embassy that the Iraqi buildup along the Kuwaiti border was just “saber rattling” and that there was nothing for us to be concerned about. Subsequently, after the invasion, Embassy officials refused my pleas to allow my wife and I to seek refuge within the Embassy compound at the same time they were granting safe haven to American diplomatic and military personnel. And, finally, ever since my release, the Department has done everything in its power to derail the lawsuit that my wife and I, along with more than 200 other former hostages, have brought against Iraq in an effort to obtain some measure of justice for the injuries we have suffered.

In March 2003, about 180 of our fellow hostages who had filed an identical lawsuit managed to obtain such justice when President Bush ordered that their judgments be paid from blocked Iraqi bank accounts. I am very pleased that these victims were able to get the justice they so greatly deserved. At the same time, however, I find it grossly unfair that a second group of victims who were held captive at the same time and under the same conditions have received not one dime. I cannot understand how the State Department can believe this situation is acceptable. I know that I never will and, unless and until something is done to right this wrong, I know that my wife and I will never be able to close the door on this horrific chapter in our lives.

I urge this Committee and this Congress to help us do that by the Braley-Sestak proposal. On behalf of my wife, myself and all of our fellow hostages, I thank you for taking the time to listen and to consider our plea.