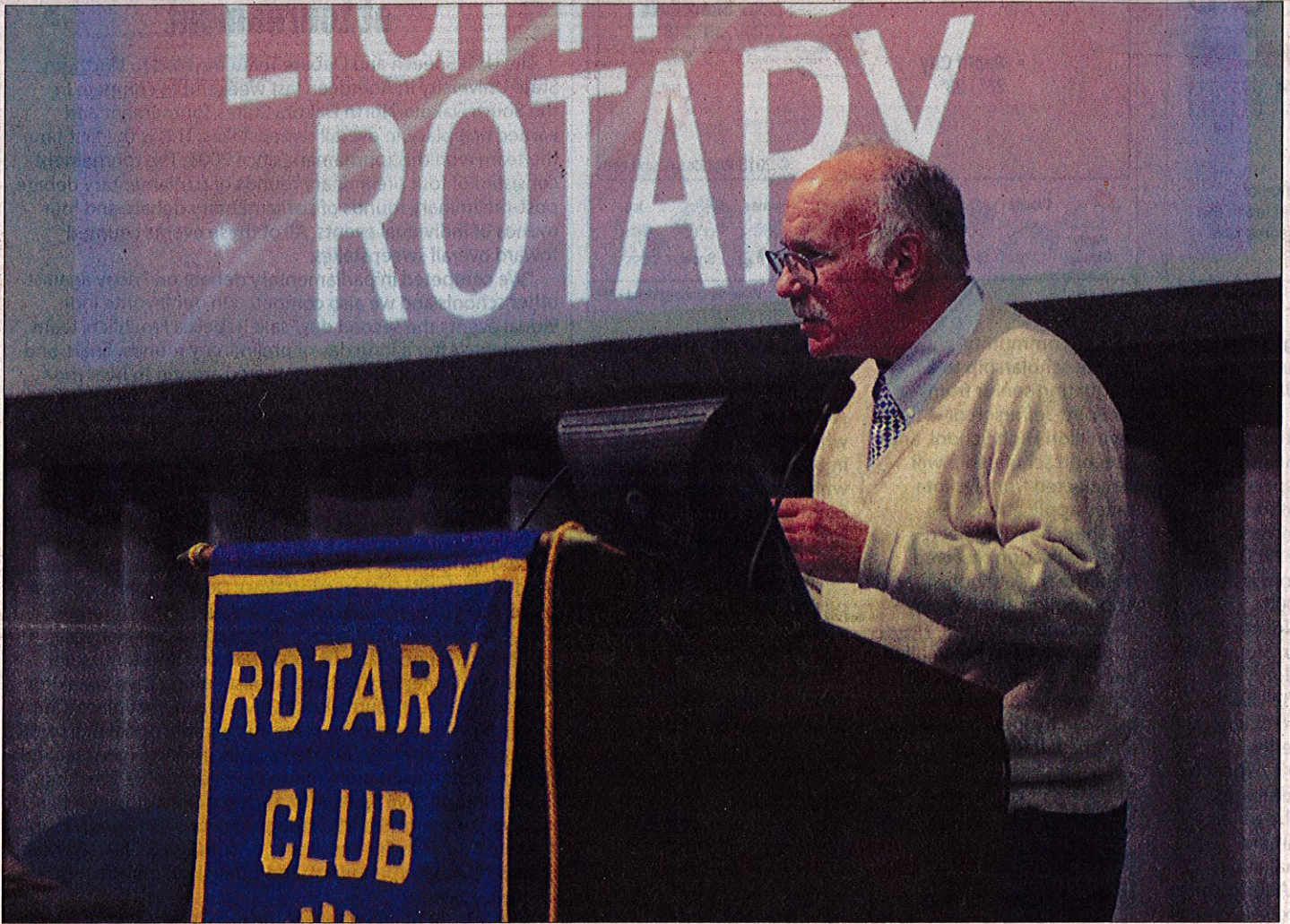


THE *Equalizer*



Journalist and author Reese Erlich addresses the Vermillion Rotary Club, and during his talk, states that the U.S. maintains a military presence in the Middle East because oil in that region remains a primary national interest. (Photo by David Lias)

Erlich: Oil remains top U.S. concern in Middle East

DAVID LIAS
Managing Editor

United States government officials may cite a myriad of reasons for running bombing missions in the Middle East, but according to journalist Reese Erlich, one cause stands out: oil.

Erlich has written five books in the last decade about the turmoil in the Middle East, and he shared his observations and expertise with members of the Vermillion Rotary Club during their noon meeting Feb. 10.

Last August, while working in northern Iraq, he encountered refugees who were fleeing a "horrific, ultra-conservative, Islamic State that ... are not made up of psychopaths, they're

perfect sense from their evil standpoint," he said.

This Islamic State are made up of Sunni Muslims, Erlich said.

"What they were doing was killing some, and driving the rest out," he said. "It was ethnic cleansing to clear the area in the middle part of Iraq of all people who might oppose them. They don't believe that Shiite Muslims are actually Muslims. They know that they will never be able to rule over those people, so they prefer to kill them or drive them out. It's a kind of ethnic cleansing like we've seen in other parts of the world."

Erlich met with United States diplomats last summer, and was told the official justifications for the most recent U.S. bombings in the region.

States was on a humanitarian mission to protect the Yazidis and other minorities from being wiped out by the Islamic State," he said. "We were protecting Iraqi Kurdistan from being overrun by the Islamic State, and we were protecting U.S. soldiers who were based in the region."

Erlich said those three reasons are the basis for the United States going to war in northern Iraq.

"When you bomb people, that is going to war. Based on my interviews and research, those three reasons actually fell apart very quickly, because the Islamic State had stopped its terror campaign against the Yazidis and others, and the U.S. military itself said the humanitarian crisis was over," he said. "Neverthe-

ERLICH

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

less, the U.S. actually intensified its bombing against the Islamic state."

He also said there was no chance that Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region of Iraq which borders the Kurdish regions of Iran to the east, Turkey to the north, and Syria to the west, was about to be overrun.

"The Kurds hate the Islamic state, there are tens of thousands of them trained and armed, and there's no way the Islamic State could have occupied and driven out all of the Kurds," Erlich said. "And finally, the whole idea that American troops needed protection is really out to lunch, because the airports were open; the U.S. could have brought in planes and evacuated everyone in less than 24 hours."

He said the United States actually increased the number of military in that region, and he contends our military presence is more about oil, and not so much a gesture to protect oppressed people.

"Iraq has the third-largest oil reserves in the world, nearby Iran is number two, Saudi Arabia is number one, and the humanitarian efforts that the U.S. claims are being pursued don't get anywhere unless there's also some other so-called national interests," Erlich said.

Those national interests, on the part of the United States, include not just oil, but also military bases that were closed during the Iraq war, and geopolitics.

"One of things that I learned is that the Islamic State has a fatal flaw in the way it runs things," he said. "There are decided limits on the area they can control."

The fatal flaw, Erlich said, is the Islamic State's rule is so harsh and so brutal that it alienates the Sunni Muslims, the people they claim to represent.

The Islamic State has not moved into southern Iraq, he said, "because the population there is overwhelmingly unfriendly to them. They certainly couldn't extend their power

to the north, into the Kurdish region, and the same applies in Syria as well."

"The people of the region, if left to their own devices, are perfectly capable of defeating the Islamic State," he said. "The U.S. bombing actually helps the Islamic State; it has the exact opposite effect of what we intend. Why? Because the Islamic State went from an evil, brutal, local group, oppressing the people of Syria and Iraq, into an international phenomenon."

Erlich's book, "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You," co-authored with Norman Solomon, became a best seller in 2003. His book, "The Iran Agenda: the Real Story of U.S. Policy and the Middle East Crisis," was published in October 2007. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* book review, Ruth Rosen wrote, "Some people are treated as pariahs when they tell the truth; later, history lauds them for their courage and convictions. Reese Erlich is one of those truth tellers."

He has also authored "Dateline Havana: The Real Story of US Policy and the Future of Cuba," which came out in January 2009. His fifth book, "Inside Syria: the Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect" was published in 2014.

He told Vermillion Rotarians to pay attention the debate in Washington as President Obama requests authorization for use of military force.

"The issues to watch are will the bill authorize the use of combat troops ... the administration wants the ability to send in troops, because as the U.S. proves incapable of stopping the Islamic State with bombing, the pressure will be there to send in troops," Erlich said.

He said it is also unclear whether there will a time limit placed on the authorization, or if it will have geographic limitations.

"We may have the opening up of worldwide military actions, with no further discussions from Congress," Erlich said. "Hopefully, there will be a thorough debate, and I would hope a voting down of this war authorization because of terms of lives lost, damage to the U.S. and the Middle East, and money spent."