

Monday, March 19, 2007

The call from my Hauppauge office came as a staffer and I returned from a Hofstra University conference on the genocide in Darfur. An anti-war group, known as "Code Pink," was gathering in front of our building.

"Let's meet with them," I said. And so, in between the Darfur conference and my flight to Washington, I found myself in a conference room with a group of Long Island women -- mothers and grandmothers -- adorned in pink. They wore pink scarves and pink t-shirts, pink earrings emblazoned with peace signs and pink hats. And they carried cellophane bags filled with plastic green toy soldiers --the kind I played with as a kid. Only back then, they weren't wrapped with tags that said: "Congressman Israel, bring me home."

"We elected you to listen to us," they said in a variety of ways. "The war was wrong when it started and it's still wrong. We want you to support withdrawing our troops. Withdraw them now."

One woman, with lips quivering, said, "My son was a Marine. I didn't raise him to kill. The war destroyed Iraq and my son."

Another protestor said: "Vote against the bill that continues funding the war. Bring our soldiers home immediately."

A woman exhorted: "We can't wait until the next President withdraws our military from Iraq. 2008 is too far away. We need to do it now." (As an Appropriations Committee member, I voted last Thursday for legislation that, for the very first time, calls for the redeployment of U.S. troops between December of this year and August 2008.)

I didn't say much initially. I believe an effective Representative does as much listening as talking. I processed their arguments, quietly agreeing with some points and disagreeing with

others. I took notes.

Finally, I responded. My conversation with them echoes the thoughts I have had on the Floor of the House, in the Appropriations Committee, at the weekend dinner table with my wife, and late at night when I drift towards sleep.

"I wish we could redeploy and end this war tomorrow," I said. "But we can't for three reasons, in my view. Let me tell you what they are and then hear your responses."

They nodded patiently.

"First, operationally, I don't believe you can redeploy over 130,000 people as fast as you would like. You can't show over 130,000 people to the exit door all at once. It will take time to dismantle our bases, to move personnel and material and to protect our forces as they redeploy. The planes they take to leave will be shot at. Their convoys will be attacked. So for logistical reasons alone, an immediate departure seems impossible."

They nodded again. And a staffer poked his head in the room and advised that I would be late for my flight to Washington.

"Then start redeploying them now," someone said.

"That's my second point," I replied. "The fact is that commencing an immediate redeployment isn't attainable politically. We don't have the votes in Congress to pass the bill."

They seemed frustrated.

"Look, when you say to me that you elected me to listen to you, I understand that. But I have

Democratic and Republican colleagues in the House whose constituents disagree with you. Their constituents want them to vote to continue the mission. If I have an obligation to listen to you, don't my colleagues in other districts have an obligation to listen to their constituents?"

Some heads nodded understandingly, perhaps even begrudgingly.

"That's what compromise is about," I said. "The resolution we voted on is a difficult compromise: too quick a redeployment for people on the right, too slow for people on the left. But, it is designed to create a trajectory towards a responsible redeployment with enough votes to pass."

"Third," I continued, "I don't honestly believe an immediate withdrawal is sound policy. I just came from a conference on the Darfur genocide. If we leave Iraq immediately, without investing the time and resources to give Iraqi security some minimal capability, we will have left behind genocide. Right now, dozens, perhaps hundreds of Iraqis die every day. If we leave immediately, I believe thousands will die every day. We will have created another Darfur. We need several months to build an Iraqi capability to avoid ethnic genocide. That is the timeframe contained in the resolution: between December and August."

One protestor asked: "what about partitioning of Iraq? Won't that help avoid genocide?" An aide entered again, signaling urgently that I was running late.

"Last year, when I first heard Senator Biden propose partition, I was skeptical. I don't know of any partition in history that created real stability instead of permanent hostility. But we know now that the solution in Iraq must be based on Iraqi political compromise and accommodation. And the resolution I supported requires the Iraqi government to achieve political progress -- or else we redeploy sooner rather than later. For the first time, we are enforcing accountability: on President Bush and on the government of Iraq."

As I left, one woman said, "I disagree, but I'm still with you on other things."

I didn't change any minds at the end of the meeting, but that wasn't the goal of the meeting. I hope I provided these women of conscience a greater understanding of how I have formulated

my judgments—just as I gained greater insight into where they were coming from now that they had arrived in my office.