

**Monday, March 12, 2007**

Hurriedly departing a meeting of the Democratic Caucus on Iraq, I ran into a reporter from a prominent Washington publication. He was staked-out in the bowels of the Capitol, in a dimly-lit tunnel cluttered with exposed cables, air-conditioning conduits, and plumbing pipes.

“Congressman, why is it so hard to find consensus on what to do in Iraq?” he asked as I walked by.

Maybe I should have kept going. But I stopped.

The answer, the simple unvarnished answer is this: Iraq has become a catastrophic mess. Somewhere between the two absolutes – stay the course forever and withdraw troops immediately – is the painful truth. And developing consensus on a legislative vehicle based on that painful truth is not easy—nor should it be easy. This is because it isn’t about politics. It’s about a policy with consequences that will determine what the next generation will face. It’s about understanding that no matter what we do, our decision will create, at best, another Lebanon—or at worst, another Darfur.

How do you write legislation easily with those stakes?

The Administration has plunged us into a catastrophic mess. Our soldiers are doing absolutely heroic work, despite a poorly-planned, ill-conceived, under-funded policy hatched by civilians in the White House and Pentagon. There are no good solutions anymore. We must find the “least worst” solution.

“What about the polls?” another reporter asked me the next day. “The majority of Americans support a pull-out right away.”

My response: it’s much easier to respond to a poll than to formulate a policy. Polls tell you what people think during a fairly brisk telephone interview at a certain point. Polls don’t delve into the

consequences of a certain position.

For example, about half of the constituents I speak to tell me they believe we should leave Iraq “immediately.” But when I broaden the topic, the answer becomes more nuanced. For example, today, dozens of Iraqis are tragically dying every day. Some believe that if we were to leave “immediately”, the numbers will grow to thousands or perhaps even tens of thousands of Iraqi deaths each day – a full-fledged genocide. “If you believe that an immediate withdrawal would unleash this kind of genocide, would you still advocate an immediate withdrawal?” Very few say yes. Instead, many will say “find ways to pull our troops out of combat but prevent the collapse of Iraq into a genocide, even if it takes a little longer than an immediate withdrawal. But not much longer.”

Fair enough.

On the other hand, many of my constituents say we should “remain until the mission is completed.” The British were stuck in Iraq for thirty-five years before they finally extricated themselves. “Are you willing to stay in Iraq until the mission is complete – even if it takes thirty five years and tens of thousands of U.S. lives?” Very few say yes.

What most people agree on is what I have been saying since an Armed Services Committee hearing I attended several months ago.

At that time, the U.S. Commander in the Middle East, General Abizaid, noted that we had until the middle of this year before things “get out of control.”

Shortly thereafter, the Iraq Study Group opined that, subject to unexpected developments, all U.S. combat brigades, not necessary for force protection, could be out of Iraq by the first quarter of 2008.

There you have it. The timeframe is this year at the earliest and next year at most. We have that limited period of time to work with the global community in training the Iraqi military so that they are able to fend-off genocide when we do leave.

For those who want this war to end tomorrow, next month or next year is way too late.

For those who want to “complete the mission,” next month or next year is way too soon.

The Administration has put us into a position where the easy solutions are the hardest to implement. And the hardest solution – redeployment between now and 2008 – may be the best solution.