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Progress and peril

*Rep. Bob Inglis talks about the Iraq war and how we should proceed*

Published: Saturday, April 28, 2007 - 2:00 am

Fourth District Rep. Bob Inglis is just back from a week in the Middle East. While there, he visited with American troops and got a first-hand look at the progress in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Inglis took the trip after drawing significant criticism from his constituents earlier this year when he voted against President Bush's plan to use a surge in U.S. troops to stabilize Iraq. During an interview Friday with editorial writers with The Greenville News, Inglis said there are signs of progress in Iraq, along with signs of peril.

"What we saw in the surge was Americans living in very dangerous circumstances," he said of his visit.

Following is an edited transcript of our interview with Inglis:

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Question: Have we lost the war in Iraq?

Rep. Inglis: No. I think we have a chance of adding a third success to the two we've already got. The two we've already got are that we asked our military to take the bad man out of the big house in Iraq and they did it. And once there, we asked them to disrupt terrorist networks, and they did it. ... So now we're in a different scenario and I think that the goal is getting to reasonable stability in Iraq and saying, 'It's your country.' ...

Q: How do you define reasonable stability?

Inglis: It means a government that's able to keep some degree of law and order, but it'll look very different than Greenville. In Greenville a car bomb a decade is too many, but in Iraq I think when we're leaving it'll be a car bomb a day, and that's just the way it's going to be. It's a very violent place with a lot of tensions.

Q: What did you see when you were on the ground in Iraq?

Inglis: Some signs of progress and also peril. Progress: We were able to drive from the airport to the Green Zone. ... that was a sign of progress; the previous trips we could only fly. Another was that we were able to get out in the market. ... And so those are some good signs of progress. And then also hearing from Gen. (David) Petraeus that in al Anbar we have cooperation from the tribal leaders there actually fighting against al-Qaida now ... which is very positive. ...

There's still a lot of peril, though.

Q: Is the surge working?

Inglis: Hard to know. The question is how you evaluate it. In terms of violence, I think Petraeus said (Thursday) actually the violence is the same as it's been. But, that's where the strategic question comes in. ... On the strategic level ... my view is ... put the pressure on the Iraqi leadership to decide these questions; the president's view ... is that if you add stability in those neighborhoods ... then the people will look to their government not to the local warlord, and we can therefore create stability that we all want. ...

Q: What do you think the sentiment in your district is on the war?

Inglis: I think there's a sense that the horse is coming to a spot where perhaps it needs to stop, and the question is which way do you fall off that horse? On the one side is to tell the Iraqis to get their act together, and to decide these things and to settle some of the underlying issues that would create the possibility for peace; and on the other hand is to create the stability by military strength. I think what's happening here in our district is people get the feeling that decision point is coming, but it's just a hard decision and it's not real clear, and so in the lack of clarity is when the emotions get strong. ...

Q: Do you regret your vote on the surge? Do you think your message got lost?

Inglis: No, I don't regret the vote; and no, I don't think the message was lost. I think it's just a very difficult situation. We realized there are not really very good options and that we're in it together.

Q: Is this an Iraqi civil war or is it a front in the war on terror?

Inglis: It's both. ... Had I been (in Congress at the time) I would have voted to go to war in Iraq because there was what we believed to be a threat to American national security with a madman in a big house with weapons of mass destruction and an intent to use them. In hindsight, what we see is he didn't necessarily have those capabilities, so that's a blow to American credibility...

I think the American national security interest was clear then. And then once we were on the ground the American national security interest was clear again when you had foreign fighters coming to the country to bring the fight to your deployed forces ... but then the Samarra mosque bombing changed things ... that's the point at which things changed and you had the Shias and Sunnis within Iraq killing each other. ... So that's where you start losing the American national security interest.

Q: What did you see in Afghanistan?

Inglis: Very different situation. You have all these tribal elements ... but they see themselves as a country ... and the Taliban and their cousins the al-Qaida folks are seen as the enemies of the state of Afghanistan, so we have support among the people and the state to fight insurgents. ...

Q: Do you think we will ever be able to leave Afghanistan?

Inglis: I don't think we should be in a big hurry to leave there because we're doing important work and we're winning. ... we have won and it is a sustainable situation. ... The real objective there is to see that al-Qaida doesn't have a place to operate.

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