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Just Back (Again) From Iraq, a Respected Voice for Change

By Lois Romano
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Majority Leader Harry Reid tapped him last year to speak out on Iraq when Senate Democrats were getting clobbered by the White House. Hillary Clinton loves him, and Republican Chuck Hagel counts him among his best friends in the Senate. And the military guys respect the fact that Jack Reed -- for a lawmaker pretty much considered a liberal Democrat -- is one of them.

The senator from Rhode Island is far from a household name, and he's not the kind of politician who instinctively turns toward the flashbulbs. You won't find him on the cocktail circuit, and in fact, at 57 years old, he's a bit of a homebody, having become a first-time father (Emily!) six months ago.

But in the past few years, the West Point graduate has traveled to Iraq 10 times and has emerged as one of the more respected voices in opposition to the Iraq war policy. This week he's front and center to shape a debate on his own amendment, which calls for a troop redeployment by April 2008.

"We have more troops there; they are being more aggressive," Reed said in an interview. "But it has not yet translated into the political momentum you need. . . . And the major premise for the surge, as the president announced, is that it would give the space needed for the Iraqi government to make tough decisions. They haven't done it."

Reed's opinions come from a current, firsthand vantage point. He landed in Washington at 6 a.m. Monday, after flying all night from Iraq -- commercially --

arriving just in time to help shape the start of the long Senate debate on Iraq.

"He's one of the most effective voices in the Senate on defense and national security," said Hagel. "He's got great credibility and relationships with all the senior military officials, veterans groups and soldiers. He studies the issues. . . . They trust him."

Retired Gen. Gordon Sullivan, former Army chief of staff, said he always found Reed to be "very supportive of the military. I always viewed him as a serious player."

Reed served actively and in the reserves until 1991, when he began his tenure in the House. He was elected to the Senate in 1996 and currently sits on the Armed Services Committee. He voted against the 2002 Iraq war authorization.

His weekend whirlwind in Iraq took him out of the Green Zone to the front lines. He was not sanguine on the Iraqi government's progress. "Unfortunately, the capacity of the ministries on the national level to do anything is still virtually nil," he said, noting that officials are "more political than they are professional."

But it was his dinner with Gen. David H. Petraeus, the top U.S. military commander in Iraq, that seemed to give him the most comfort.

"This increase of forces will have to conclude at some point simply because of the overall structures of the military forces," he said. "If you know it's going to end, and you haven't made political progress and you recognize that the American people are increasingly restless . . . I think they are doing the analysis and what they have to conclude is that we've got to change course."

"General Petraeus went out of his way to consciously say that he recognizes he has to consider the overall forces structure of the military when he makes his recommendations. He knows he can't simply walk in and say . . . 'I want more troops.' "

As for the much-mentioned September deadline for reassessment, Reed said of Petraeus: "He's not waiting for some arbitrary date. The bottom line is that there has to be some adjustments in strategy, and I suspect he'll make it."