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Inglis looks for benchmarks in Iraq policy

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America must show Iraq there are consequences for failure to reach benchmarks in self-governance and political stability, U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis said Monday.

"We need to work toward an American solution to an American challenge," Inglis, R-S.C., said from his home Monday afternoon.

"It's important to try to forget about the partisan aspects of this and try to forget about the political consequences, and find a policy that will work for the United States, and know that ultimately, that will be good politics."

Just hours earlier, Inglis spent considerable time in a room full of die-hard Republicans at a Spartanburg restaurant defending the GOP resolve when it comes to success in Iraq.

Inglis said most people agree generally on America's goal there (now) and on what would constitute success. The major differences, he said, lie in tactical decisions - like whether to set a date for troop withdrawal.

Inglis has opposed such a withdrawal date, though he did vote against President Bush's recent troop surge, for which he took a lot of heat in his home district.

"It's a done deal. I've seen the surge. Those of us who thought it was a bad idea are praying for its success," Inglis said.

He pointed out that one option moving forward could be withdrawing non-military assistance to Iraq. In other words, set benchmarks for progress - Inglis calls them "success checkpoints" - and if they are not met, then postpone awarding contracts for, say, water purification plants, or to companies that would do other infrastructure work.

The monthly luncheons at Wade's typically draw a decidedly conservative crowd, often people who support the president even when Inglis doesn't.

This month's topic was "America's Best," an outlet for Inglis to lavish praise on U.S. troops.

Monday's event could be considered a coda to his recent seven-day tour of the Middle East, which

included stops in Iraq, Afghanistan, Jordan and Turkey.

Inglis reiterated the "progress and perils" he noted there, but then turned the floor over to Brad Hamlett, a 25-year-old soldier from Greenville who was open with the crowd but refused to give his rank and unit number to the <I>Herald-Journal</I>.

Hamlett did say he was his brigade's budgeting and purchasing officer; that he's based in Kuwait City, but makes regular trips to Iraq; that he just returned home for a 14-day break before heading back; and that he's been overseas since August.

Hamlett offered to answer questions, but for the next 45 minutes acted more as a sounding board for people in the room on how they feel about the effort in Iraq. Hamlett was put in the potentially awkward position of telling them, "No, actually it's like this ..." or having to reaffirm their beliefs.

One of the most striking rants, culled from about half the people in the room, was on how the American broadcast media was undermining the war.

"We have faith in our troops. We have faith in our commander-in-chief. But we don't hear the positives," said Brian Kipling of Greer.

Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid's "the war is lost" comment came up, but it was hard to tell if people were more upset about what Reid said or that the message reached so many people via television and newspapers.

"So many people are willing to accept defeat on this," said Roger Clayton, a 57-year-old Spartanburg native.

"I will not accept defeat."

One man talked about the flag-waving journalists from his generation who covered World War II, and accosted today's media as "participants with the enemy."

But Hamlett took a different view of the matter.

"We get the same news channels that you do," he said. "Fox, CNN - They show schools being built. A lot of viewers just tune in for the bombings because that's what's exciting."

Inglis eventually steered the conversation back to the war in Iraq, and the men and women fighting there.

"The hardest thing about being in Iraq is leaving," Inglis said, "because you're surrounded by a group of people who are full of passion and purpose. That's the Americans."