



# Freedom's Children and the Work of Significance in Iraq

**Editor's note:** This is the second of four parts describing a congressional delegation trip to Iraq between Feb. 24-28, 2005, by Sens. Jim DeMint (SC), Sam Brownback (KS), and Reps. Rob Portman (Oh-2) and Bob Inglis (SC-4)

BY U.S. REP. BOB INGLIS

**Day 2:  
The Nobility of Volunteers**  
Saturday, February 26, 2005

Kuwait City to Baghdad to Fallujah to Baghdad to Kuwait City

Trying to maximize the quantity if not the quality of some shuteye, I skipped breakfast downstairs and opted for an orange in Room 910 at 7:00 a.m. At 7:15 we left the Crown Plaza, driving by vans to Kuwait City International Airport for our first flight into Baghdad.

Fog delayed our departure but gave time for Rep. Rob Portman to join the Codel. He had flown to Kuwait City International Airport on British Airways after attending a Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce event at which his father had been honored with a significant award. With our delegation complete, we boarded a C130 for the 1 ½ hour flight to Baghdad. All of us were aware of the risk of flying into the war zone. As expected, we finished the flight with a steep descent to a short and low approach into the Baghdad airport.

On arrival we were quickly shown to an armored vehicle aptly dubbed an "ice cream truck." As we drove from the airport to Camp Victory General David Petraeus gave us a 20 minute briefing on the training of Iraqi police and armed forces.

We arrived at Camp Victory and had lunch with soldiers—curried chicken being the feature of the day in the huge concrete-floor facility operated by a private contractor. The food was remarkably diverse and really pretty tasty, although the main entrée was more the conversation with the troops.

After lunch we drove in the ice cream truck to the Combined Exploitation Center for a briefing on improvised explosive devices. The briefing itself took place in a military trailer near the bathhouse on the grounds the Water Palace, a series of structures around a large lake that Saddam Hussein dug and stocked with fish. Apparently the compound was something of a resort for members of the Baath Party, ostentatiously decorated with lots of marble poorly affixed to its crumbling structure. Saddam apparently valued marble more than pipes as every bathroom we visited was in need of a makeover by a better plumber.

The main presenter at the IED briefing was a fit 30 year-old blond Navy commander who described the problem: a nation awash with ordinance (mortars, etc.) in the hands insurgents who “stand off” and use household devices (garage door openers, ceiling fan remotes, cell phones, etc.) to detonate their charges at their estimation of the moment of maximum lethality. One of the delegation asked about the possibility of creating a zone of protection for convoys by jamming the electronic signals used to detonate the devices. Eyes flashing and hands moving, the American talked of the hope of developing such a technology--“can do” coming from every pore of his young body. In stunning contrast, the American was followed by his British counterpart. Dismissively he declared, “In all of these investigations we are one step behind the insurgents. We will always be one step behind the insurgents.” Alluding to their experience in Northern Ireland, another older and balding Brit added, “With all due respect to our American partners, we’ve had 30 years of experience on explosives, and we’re much further along the learning curve than you are.”

As frustration rose in every American in the room, I wonder if the Brit even noticed the contrast, a contrast that has characterized the approach to Iraq and perhaps to life itself. Even here—with our cousins, the soldiers of our best ally of all times—the difference now appeared. At least they were here, I reasoned. At least they had joined the “Coalition of the Willing,” even if there was a difference in expectations.



General Petraus at Camp Victory (near Baghdad International Airport)

The American Navy commander had filled the room with optimism and determination. The Brit was breathing fatalism. Part of the difference was cultural; part was informed by whose brothers and sisters were guarding those convoys and facing those improvised explosive devices. The Brit finished his presentation and time permitted only the briefest rejoinder from the American. Without acrimony and in code perhaps understandable only to the Americans in the trailer beside Saddam's lake, our commander assured us that they would keep working on that jamming technology. Satisfied, we left knowing that a maxim of our common faith would be applied: "Lead, follow or get out of the way."

After the IED briefing, we climbed back into the ice cream truck for a short ride to another palace in the compound that is now Camp Victory. This was Uday's house. Between the marbled laden house of the former dictator's son and the dugout lake, the MPs had set up a display of the vehicles they were using for patrolling and for force protection. We viewed the weapons, climbed into the turrets in the back of the Humvees, marveled at the scopes and learned from the dedicated. Then we went inside for further briefings on the training and development of the Iraqi police force. The briefing showed commendable commitment on the American side and significant need on the Iraqi side. Far from the ornate inlaid table we sat around for the briefing, we learned that police stations in Iraq are often single rooms furnished with a table and a chair. Sophisticated police work, we learned, will take time to develop.

We got up from the briefing to head to the Black Hawk helicopters that would take us to Fallujah. In the lobby of Uday's palace we put on our armored vests near a crystal tree—a look-alike of an office-sized ficus tree but this one made of crystal. Vests on, we moved outside and down a stone embankment to the waiting helicopters.

Black Hawks are fighting machines. They can be driven from either seat up front and they have seats for gunners on both sides. As we strapped ourselves in I was aware of our protectors. I couldn't see the pilots, but I could see the gunners. I could see their eyes. I could see their young bodies rocking back and forth toward the glassless windows, training their guns at potential threats below. I could see them leaning out of the windows, looking forward, looking back, scouring the countryside, ready to shoot and to be shot at. Later, I would be asked by Dan Hoover of the *Greenville News* if I felt at risk. "No, "I would respond, "With folks like that at the ready, it was hard to feel at risk. I'd go anywhere with those guys."



Soldiers outside the Water Palace and the lake that Saddam had constructed

We flew south to Fallujah covering diverse territory. First, there were bombed-out industrial buildings near the airport. Then there were urban residential areas dominated by one-story flat-roofed dwellings along with some multistory apartment buildings. Nearly all the structures had water tanks on top. Since the water flow had been unpredictable in Saddam's regime, homeowners had installed storage tanks for the dry times. The urban scenes gave way to agricultural areas with silage crops, date palms and olive trees. We saw a farmer and his children spreading fertilizer or lime by hand and children tending goats. Water buffalo grazed in partially flooded fields and cows stood or lay in grassless pens near rural dwellings. Beyond these agricultural areas we flew over desert brush and then Fallujah appeared.

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We intervened in Afghanistan to destroy terrorist networks. In retrospect, that should have been our primary justification for intervention in Iraq. As it was, we thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and the will and even the record of using them. Perhaps those weapons have been moved or remain hidden. Perhaps they no longer existed when we entered Iraq. The experience shows (a) the necessity of extreme caution in pursuing preemption; (b) the necessity of excellent intelligence.

We could have avoided damage to American credibility by articulating the more certain justification for engagement, that is, the disruption of terror networks. While it is not certain that Saddam Hussein controlled those networks, it appears that his regime was willing to aid and abet. Our troops have been disrupting those networks and fighting terrorists in places like Baghdad and Fallujah. Those who despise our freedoms and freedom way of life have been drawn to the magnet of our forwardly deployed forces. If our enemies insist on engagement, it's better that they engage military targets on foreign fields. Daily, our forces are interrupting terror networks; daily, they are serving as decoys. ["Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." John 15:13.] In this they are immediately making America safer. They are also opening up the possibility of freedom in the Middle East, a possibility that would dramatically benefit America and the world.

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We landed at Camp Fallujah and were welcomed by General Sattler, an impressive leader with a keen sense of mission and smiling eyes. The General took us to the command center, a 40 X 40 room full of computers with projection screens at one end. Over the next 30 minutes the Battle of Fallujah unfolded on those screens, annotated by the General and an obviously sharp team of 20 or 30 folks. They re-created for us an urban assault which made heroes of 20 year olds, celebrated the cooperation between the branches of the service, and demonstrated our blue screen tracker system capable of showing commanders and combatants the real-time locations of friendly and enemy units (accurate within 10 meters).

In one of the most intense battle situations that Americans have faced since Vietnam, the General reported losing 51 Americans. Not a single one of those was lost to friendly fire. The blue screen tracker system had cut through the fog of battle, even in the house-to-house combat of Fallujah.

“Convert, capture or kill. That was our approach,” the General explained. “I was mostly interested in conversion,” he said. “If we could get them to convert and come over to our side, we’d define that as real success—better than capturing or killing.” For the notorious, though, the General admitted that “kill” was the singular goal.

The General explained the complexity of battle in and around sites of significance. He showed slides of three successive strikes on a mosque in Fallujah that is one of the holiest sites to Sunni Muslims. There was a sniper on the mosque’s main minaret. The sniper survived a first and then a second strike. On the third, coalition forces called in a 500 pound bomb and the minaret and the sniper—but only the minaret and the sniper—were destroyed. Later we would see the pile of rubble that was the minaret and hear of the General’s impatience for getting it rebuilt.

When the Battle of Fallujah was over, Coalition forces buried over 500 insurgents. The General explained that there were other casualties, but that the people of Fallujah had buried some of their own. Custom preventing them from burying “foreigners” (defined as someone from another town); many of the bodies were badly decomposed. Many were found with fresh American \$100 bills in their pockets, identifying them as possible mercenaries from distant locations.



MP shows equipment at Camp Victory

The briefing was complete with a now-famous photo of American ingenuity. In the photo one American holds a stick with a helmet on top, raising the helmet above a concrete wall as a decoy drawing enemy fire. His buddy is on the ground returning fire to the then-identified enemy location through a hole in a lower part of the wall. The General pointed to the stack of sticks in the photo, assuring us that it was a sophisticated but affordable weapons system. And then he added a more serious insight: “This is the kind of creativity you get from kids who grow up in freedom. They know no limits. They’re willing to try things out, to be creative.”

From the briefing room we walked to the General’s office to suit up again with vests. In his office, he told us that the Marines haven’t had a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient since Vietnam. “There may be one or two of those from the Battle of Fallujah,” he told us. “You can kinda’ get wet eyes,” he continued, “when you tell their stories.” Sensing the clear invitation to continue, he told one, but not without having to stop to regain his composure.

A Marine fighting in Fallujah entered a house to rescue 4 fallen Marines. Under fire from an insurgent, he pulled two out and went back in for the other two. On reentering the “gateway of death” (the cross fire chamber at the entrance to the house), his weapon was struck by an insurgent’s bullet and incapacitated. Throwing down his gun, the Marine took out his knife and lunged at the insurgent, taking him out with a blow to the chest.

Having shown us the battle, the General wanted to show us the town itself so we loaded into armored Humvees and started toward Fallujah. Riding with Sens. Jim DeMint and Sam Brownback, the General got word en route of incoming fire near the south bridge over the Euphrates (about 300 meters from our planned first stop at the city center). Reluctantly, he decided that the first would have to be the only stop, and he called off the planned tour of the south bridge.

Once at the city center, a roughly constructed one-story building with a main room now full of American communication equipment, the General told us more of his passion for rebuilding Fallujah, a Sunni town in the midst of a Shia-dominated Iraq. If we can rebuild Fallujah, he explained, we will send a signal to the Sunni Muslims (dominant in most of the countries of the Middle East) that American-style democracy brings respect for minorities. That strategic victory would be more significant than the tactical military victory in Fallujah, he explained. Aware that we would be



Rep. Portman, Sen. DeMint and Sen. Brownback with the troops at Camp Victory

meeting with current and potential Iraqi leaders the next day, he asked us to lobby the Iraqi government to release the funds to get the rebuilding underway.

Clearly understanding the power of capturing hearts rather than territory, the General spoke of an attack earlier in the day that left a house on fire in Fallujah. One of the first on the scene was an American Colonel who kicked in the door and pulled the two children inside to safety. Confident that news of that incident would spread quickly through the town, the General said that the citizens of Fallujah have come to appreciate the Americans. He said that residents fear that our withdrawal will be followed by the insurgent's return and that the residents often say to the soldiers, "Don't leave us."

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When he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell articulated sound principles that have become known as the "Powell Doctrine": that military force should be used as a last resort; that it should be used only if there is a clear threat to our national security; that the force should be overwhelming and disproportionate to the force to be encountered; that there should be support among the American people for the use of force; and that there should be a clear strategy to exit the conflict.

Before committing troops to places like Iraq, it's crucial that the second test be met—that there be a clear threat to our national security. Here it is essential to differentiate between the American interest and the Iraqi interest. The benefits that may accrue to the Iraqi people from our engagement are significant enough to warrant the commitment of American treasure. Only the protection of the American homeland can justify the commitment of American blood.

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Outside the sun was beginning to set and photographic "sweet light" was pouring down the 10-foot corridor into the room in which we were standing. A Marine with a communications pack and desert-colored battle gear sat on the edge of a row of chairs against the corridor's wall, his face back lighted by the sweet light. I had taken few photos, but I was determined to get this one. While the General spoke I moved to the right to get in position to take the shot. The Marine moved but others came and went through my sweet light lens, a lens that would be lost when the camera was lost later in the trip.

Briefing completed, we exited through the sunlit corridor toward the waiting Humvees. Surrounded by Marines and other soldiers with obvious admiration for him, the General apologized once again for not being able to take us down to the south bridge. “Heck,” he taunted, “I wouldn’t go down there myself.”

“Oh yes you would,” Rob Portman interjected. The General’s men laughed and the General beamed with obvious assent.

Climbing into the front passenger side of our Humvee, I turned to look at our guide in the back left seat, Rob Portman in the back right. The gunner stood between us, his vested torso outside the hatch, sun gleaming on his helmet and dark glasses. Between the gunner’s legs I asked our guide about the General. “We love him, sir,” the Colonel replied, telling us that his career had tracked with the General’s.

Now out onto the 4-lane road heading east for the 5 kilometer ride to Camp Fallujah, we passed a car here and there. Over on the left, a pick up truck had pulled in near a house, children the ages of mine in the back. They waved as we passed, some holding up their right index finger symbolic of their new freedom. Further down the road two teenagers stood on a sand covered side street, one kicking the dust with tip of his shoe. Kicking the dust would become for me a mental image of how despair can turn to discontent. Tomorrow I would lobby the Iraqi officials for a swift reconstruction of Fallujah.

Just then the Colonel stopped talking, his eyes frozen on the scene ahead. I turned forward, took a breath and braced for what seemed a certain collision. A small white car was stopped—half in the right hand lane and half off the road. In front of the car a dusty tanker was similarly situated. Two men were standing in the 10 feet between the two vehicles. I had almost called out, “Watch out!” but I had caught our driver’s eye in my turn forward. He was watching all right—as alert as those gunners on the Black Hawks. I expected him to hit the brake, but he punched the accelerator instead, veering into the left lane at the last possible moment. We passed. Out of explosive range the Colonel continued, “That wasn’t a good situation.” He offered no further explanation; none was needed. We hadn’t been in Iraq but for a matter of hours, but we already perceived the risks that our convoys were facing daily on dangerous roads.

Back at Camp Fallujah we had dinner with the troops in the mess hall. It was Mexican night and the burritos were good. Jim DeMint sat at one end of the South Carolina table; I sat at



Headed toward Fallujah



the other. Between us were 8 Marines. One was a strikingly stylish and articulate woman from Myrtle Beach in her mid-twenties who talked about leaving active duty and going into the reserves in another year. The others talked of their service, and I talked of the lack of mine. “A missed step,” I told them. “I wish that I had done what you’re doing. I’d be a better citizen and a better congressman.” It would be a theme I would return to the next day with a fellow 45-year old.

The end of dinner came too quickly and we stood for photos. “How could I just leave these folks here,” I was thinking. As far as I could tell at that moment, here was the frontline of significance. I squeezed in some questions about their anticipation of the adjustment to life back at home. They were eager to go home all right, but they knew it would be difficult to leave the intensity and the camaraderie of Fallujah. And they knew that loved ones at home would be hard-pressed to understand the experience.

We walked out of the mess hall, made our way through dark passageways back to the General’s office, put on our vests and headed out to the pad where the Black Hawks were waiting.

It was cooler now and I was thankful for the vest and for my liner-less field coat. I buttoned the coat in the wind coming through the gunner’s windows. Throughout the day it had been too much coat—too warm for the 60 degree temperatures, too big for me without the bulk of the liner, too heavy with every pocket stuffed with gifts for the soldiers—

House seal stickers, phone cards supplied by Jim’s office and laser engraved crescent moon and palmetto tree dog tags supplied by Medals of America in Fountain Inn, SC. Our helicopters lifted off, flying low and fast across the darkened brush below. An occasional light from a dwelling or the reach of a car’s headlights illuminated the otherwise abandoned terrain below. At night it all seemed more ominous; our gunner even more alert. He was rocking in his seat again, leaning out of the window, looking forward, looking back. But this time he was using night vision equipment. The green light from the gun’s scope illuminated his right eye. Pupil small, his eye blinked fast, darting this way and that way, peering ever more deeply into the darkness below. His scope and the instrument panel up front were the only lights in the cabin. Through the front windshield I could make out the Black Hawk carrying Sens. Jim DeMint and Sam Brownback. We flew on over the increasingly urban landscape below, making our way back to the Baghdad International Airport. We turned to make our approach and off to the left, now just



Inglis and DeMint with South Carolina troops

above the horizon, rose a huge orange moon. Rob tapped me, motioning toward the tranquil scene. We landed and flew/taxied toward the C130 waiting to take us back to Kuwait City.

Once on the C130 Rob Portman and I were given our turns in the cockpit. We buckled in and put on the crew headphones, connecting us to the thoughts of the pilot, co-pilot, engineer and load masters. Just then, Colonel Ellsworth, the Chief Senate Air Force Liaison escorting the Codel, came from the back of the plane and half-way up the stairs into the cockpit. Leaning in to both of us, he passed on the news that would become the dominant memory of the day and of the trip: “You should know that we’re carrying bodies back here.”

Stunned by the news, I listened half-heartedly to the headphone banter. The moon was at 94% illumination, the co-pilot complained. “Too damned bright,” he told all listening. I was aware but unworried that the same moon that was flooding his night vision goggles was also flooding our silhouette. The vision of that gunner’s illuminated and watchful eye flooded my memory, giving a sense of protection that I realized was unrelated to the current aircraft.

Consciously avoiding dehydration, I had been drinking plenty of water. I debated whether I could wait for a restroom in Kuwait City—an hour and a half away. After 20 minutes or so, I decided to climb down the steps to survey the scene in the back. The undivided load area was divided into four psychological compartments. The first held our delegation and some soldiers, crowded, sleeping. The second held a large stack of palletized materiel. The third held a group of 7 young soldiers, three on the port side of the plane and four on the starboard. The fourth held the caskets, three on the bottom and two flag-draped ones on the top, all brightly illuminated by down lights overhead.

I decided that it was too crowded to make my way to the facilities at the very back of the plane so I climbed back up the stairs, resuming my position next to Rob Portman on the observation seat. I put on the headphones but my mind was on the caskets. I wanted to pay my respects in some way, but circumstances argued against it. I’d have to climb through a labyrinth of feet in the first psychological compartment, squeeze by the materiel in the second, adapt to the youth of the third and deal with the wave of emotion in the fourth. Circumstances gave way as I conceived a plan: I would invite one of the Codel staff members to take my priority place, I’d



A gunner on a Black Hawk helicopter

visit the facilities and I'd end up in that third compartment. Awkwardly, I made my way into the first compartment.

C130s are loud, especially in the back. Sound reverberates from the four propellers through the cavernous interior (cavernous until you see a C5A or a C17). Each time we entered a C130 we were offered ear plugs; all accepted. Leaning down and yelling into the staff member's ear, I asked if he wanted to take my place in the cockpit. He demurred, perhaps aware of the maze of feet of partially sleeping colleagues. I almost abandoned my trek. Resolving to continue on and simply give up my spot in the cockpit, I entered the gauntlet. Stepping on toe after toe of sleeping Codel colleague, I cleared the first compartment. I slid through the narrow space between the materiel in the second compartment, right hand on the ribs of the fuselage to port and left hand on the materiel. Emotion rather than physics challenged the passage through the young soldier's compartment. All were sleeping except for the one on the starboard side nearest the caskets. She was looking down, adjusting her CD player. I was thankful that we would avoid eye contact because I wasn't sure when the wave of emotion would strike—whether on this first passage by the caskets or when I returned to take the remaining seat opposite her in the seat nearest the caskets on the port side of the plane. I was also aware of the watchful eyes of the two loadmasters. They busied themselves by peering out of the windows at their assigned stations, one at port the other at starboard. At lower altitudes, especially on approach and departure from Baghdad International Airport, those would be crucial look-out stations for enemy fire. Just now they were more a means of avoiding eye contact.

After visiting the facilities, I turned to make my way back to that one remaining seat in the third compartment. As I moved, I was remembering the funeral I had attended in December of 2004 for a South Carolina lieutenant killed in Iraq. Unmarried and survived by a mom, dad and siblings including a twin brother, the stories and photos of his life had made the sacrifice real. Like his, these caskets held memories and relationships and personal futures that would not be lived out. They held sacrifice and devotion. They held the nobility of having volunteered to do what needed to be done. They held the hope that loved ones would be safe from terror and that strangers in a foreign land would taste and savor freedom.

Martin Silverstein introduced me to the concept of sitting Shiva, the Jewish custom of mourning the death of a loved one. It starts with internment and is followed by seven days of



Scene from Black Hawk helicopter

mourning with morning and evening prayers. I knew nothing about the soldiers in the caskets and nothing about the circumstances of their lives or their deaths. But, I could sit Shiva for them, at least on this leg of their journey home.

So I took my seat, head in hands, and the wave hit.

I had determined that I would pray. I would pray for their families. I would pray for their children. I would pray for the youth pastor who would be torn up. I would pray for the high school teacher who would cry for her favorite student. And I would pray in the absence of all of those--for the troubled kid who had no favorite teacher, no youth pastor and no intact family at home. I would adopt him for this time as my friend. I would thank God for him and mourn his passing. I would tell him that he was a hero and that I would write a story about him. I would say goodbye.

Tissues aren't available on C 130s, and I was thankful for long sleeves. As the plane landed at Kuwait International Airport, I sensed the awkwardness of the moment. What if the delegation exited out of the front door? What if this was the funeral detail in the third compartment and I was now an interloper, a civilian in the way of this military family.

I determined that it just wouldn't be right to move for any reason other than that I was in the way. As the pilot cut the throttle to the engines and we taxied to a stop, I leaned toward the soldier nearest me on the port side. "Are you part of the funeral detail?" I asked. "No," came the answer as the cargo door at the rear of the plane began its descent. Tension rose as I wondered if my resolve to stay put would throw the Codel off schedule, although I reasoned that we had simply to board vans and ride back to the Crown Plaza Hotel in Kuwait City.

I looked over my left shoulder around the materiel and toward the delegation; no one was moving yet. The cargo door was now fully open revealing a detachment of soldiers standing at attention between the plane and a refrigerated truck ready to receive the bodies. Later I would hear from Sam Werberg of the American Embassy staff that it is protocol that no one would leave the plane until the bodies had left the plane. In this as in much of protocol, form follows substance. It was clear to me that no American on that plane was going to move an inch until the fallen had been honored.