



Freedom's Children and the Work of Significance in Iraq

Editor's note: This is the third 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 3:

Sharing the DNA of Freedom

Sunday, February 27, 2005

Kuwait City to Baghdad to the "Green Zone" in Baghdad to Kuwait City

Another short night was cut shorter by our escorts' requirement that our bags be available for pick-up at 6 a.m. The congressional culture and the military culture were destined for a small collision on this matter and 6 became 6:15. The earlier than necessary pick-up gave rise to a full buffet breakfast in the hotel's dining room. For the adventurous almost anything was available, some of which I'd never conceived as breakfast fare. I passed on the tofu marinated in artichokes and opted for porridge, an omelet and fruit instead.

At 7:15 a.m. we boarded vans again headed for the Kuwait City International Airport. Sam Werberg again played the role of host and tour guide. From his seat up front, Sam answered our many questions about the scenery, about the culture and about current events in Kuwait and around the region. Sam's knowledge of the region made these informal briefings some of the most valuable of the trip.

Traveling the same American-style four-lane roads for the second day now, we were familiar with the sand and small brush expanse, refineries on the left and the vacationers on the right. Sam explained that the roads were designed by Americans in the 60's and 70's. The refineries too were designed and built in many cases by American companies.

I asked about Flour Daniel's presence in the region and Sam said that the company was well respected in Kuwait and involved now in a very large refinery upgrade. Two nights before we had discussed the common but wasteful practice of burning off gas from the refining process, plumes of flames dotted the landscape on that side of the four-lane road. Off to the right vacationers were camping in large tents powered by generators and adorned by an SUV near every tent's door. Women in veils walked together around the camps where fireworks had been common the night before. This was the continuing celebration of Kuwaiti independence.

Sam explained that Kuwait is a socialistic monarchy. By its constitution Kuwait's oil reserves belong to its 800,000 citizens, all of whom receive monthly checks from the government. The country hosts some 1.2 million guest workers who come from places like Pakistan and India to do the work that Kuwaitis would not do. This would explain the 4 day weekend, the ubiquitous SUV and the invisibility of an entrepreneurial class.

We arrived at the Kuwait City International Airport with a scheduled opportunity to talk with troops passing through the airport on the way in to or out of Iraq. The opportunity would grow longer and richer because of the delayed arrival of our inbound C130. These encounters and other encounters throughout the trip would display the strength of our all-volunteer force. For some military service had been a ticket out of bad circumstances or a difficult time in high school. For others military service was one among many viable options. For all training and experience had produced a collective force worthy of respect.

"Just want you to know that these guys may be a little down," a helpful captain warned us. "Most of the guys here in this waiting room have been home on special circumstances leave." The captain went on to explain that one soldier, for example, had gone home to place his "acting out" 13-year old son with his brother. "These deployments are tough on marriages and family," the captain said. Searching my face for a reaction he offered, "You can go around and visit with them if you want, it's just they might not talk much."

I took it as an engraved invitation to a walking town meeting and started around the room. Here was an opportunity to get uncontrolled feedback. And here was an opportunity to help. If these guys were hurting, what was I there for but to offer encouragement?

"I went home to be with my wife while she had surgery," one sleepy soldier told me while another across the room pretended not to listen. I thought of how it might be to go home for two weeks of



The flight deck of a C130

nursing duty. It would be meaningful, I thought, but not exactly what I would have had in mind as a break from war and separation.

I made my way to the consciously passive listener trying to read his circumstances. I knew I couldn't start the conversation with "So what's your problem" or its equivalent, so I took a different tact. He was about my height, as thin but not as gray. "So how long have you been in the service," I asked, trying to calculate his age. "Twenty-six years," he said. "Whoa," I said, "You must have joined at 18."

"My mom had to sign for me," he said. "I was a messed up kid. The Army changed my life." He would never disclose what had taken him home on special circumstances leave, but we had a great conversation about being one of the older guys in his unit. At 45 he was an inspiration to me, and the conversation took a turn that my wife would not have liked. Here he was: my age, my build, an alternate destiny.

"Do you think they'd take me?" I asked him.

"Don't know," he replied, "Depends on what you do."

"I'm a lawyer," I said as he looked me over. "But I run and work out. Do you think I could do it?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "You could pass the physical test for being a lawyer easy, and we need lots of lawyers. Seems like there's a lawyer in every briefing I go to nowadays—talking about the rules of engagement and things like that."

For me the conversation was familiar. I had here before— wanted to join, wanting to be part of the work of significance. When the first Gulf War had started, I was practicing commercial real estate law in Greenville, South Carolina. Keith Halseth was in Kuwait. Keith had been in the middle school group at our church during my law school years. My wife and I were volunteer leaders in that group, and we had spent a fair amount of time with Keith. In 1991, he was in the desert and I was on Ben Street. He was a risk and I was safe. His life could be ended at any moment; mine looked good with a wife and three children 5, 3 and 1. Overcome by the contrast, I considered joining but thought myself too old even then at 32. I wrote to Keith telling him of my admiration for what he was doing, that I wished I had done the same and that I hoped that serving in Congress might prove to be suitable substitute service. At the time we had just begun a long-shot challenge race in South Carolina's Fourth District.



En route to Fallujah from Baghdad International Airport

As I was replaying these scenes in my mind one of our escorts came into the airport waiting room to tell us that our C130 was in. We—the helpful captain and me—moved toward the door to the tarmac. Over the next hour and a half, that captain would prove tremendously helpful, educating Rob Portman and me on the lay of the land in Iraq.

We got on the C130 and chose seats near each other, the captain and me on the starboard side of the plane, Rob facing us from the row of seats in the middle of the plane. Yelling so as to be heard, I was certain the captain would lose his voice before we got to Baghdad. At one point I suggested that he should rest his voice, but he was content to continue the tutorial.

Captains and majors are good sources of information about what's really happening, I had been told. They're high enough in the command structure to have some perspective, but not so high as to have become isolated from on-the-ground reality. After returning home I would be asked by a reporter if I was certain that we had gotten an accurate sense of the American-led effort in Iraq or whether we had seen and heard only what the Departments of Defense and State had wanted us to see and hear. The captain was my answer.

He graduated from West Point, served state-side during Desert Storm, separated from the Army, got an MBA and took a job on Wall Street. Now he had volunteered to come to Iraq with a National Guard unit. A prime example of America's finest; here he was schooling two congressmen. Dressed in desert fatigues, wearing his vest and helmet and carrying his M16, the captain was prepared for class.

He told us the good, the bad and the ugly. No complainer himself, he explained the challenge of lengthy National Guard rotations. "They're called up; they leave home for 5 months of ramp-up state-side; they go to Iraq for 12 months; then they come home for a 2 month ramp-down. That's 19 months as opposed to 12 months for active duty Army."

He told us of two policy changes that had boosted morale. First, state-side leave was now reckoned exclusive of travel days, giving soldiers a true 2 weeks at home during their year of deployment. Second, we were now providing transportation to the soldier's home rather than to a major port of entry. Incredulous, I said to him: "Tell me that it wasn't our policy to take someone who was risking his life for our country, fly him to some port of entry, say, Norfolk, and then expect him to pay his own way home to San Diego." I smashed the palm of my hand against my forehead as he answered in the affirmative.



In the back of a C130 with the cargo door open

He told us how the oil for food program had destroyed the economy of Iraq. “Forget about the corruption in the program,” he said. “What’s more important is what it did to the people.” He explained that the market basket guarantees had destroyed the incentive to produce in places like Iraq. Meanwhile, handling the imported food stuffs gave skimming opportunities for the Saddam regime, causing the regime to prefer the imports to domestic production. The regime gave cotton seeds to farmers just to keep them busy, knowing full well that their cotton would never sell in international commerce. Rather than producing high-value crops uniquely suited to the Iraqi soil and water conditions—like watermelons and cantaloupes—the regime would pile up the domestically produced cotton and let it rot.

The captain told us that on Wall Street he is the ultimate free market advocate, but he said we should protect the Iraqi farmers as they attempt to get back into production. He said that we’re preaching the theory of free trade to the Iraqi farmers, but without some subsidies and price supports they’re unwilling to plant.

He told us of the inherent conflict of interest in having the USDA (Department of Agriculture) set up Iraq’s farm policy. “How can you expect someone who represents Iowa wheat to give impartial advice to farmers in Iraq who could raise their own wheat? They need to grow some of their own, not import all of it from us. Wheat would be one of the ways to get an agricultural economy going in Iraq. You can’t serve two masters and it’s unfair to put a good person in that position.”

The captain told us of the need for flexibility in appropriations. He told us of 4 all-nighters that preceded the last supplemental and how those all-nighters produced a plan to construct medical clinics. Now it’s clear that some of those facilities should be built in other places, and that we need to give them the flexibility of reprogramming some of those expenditures. He suggested that we call on a group like Business Executives for National Security to manage the spending.

He told us of the need to protect recently constructed border crossing outposts from looting. He said that we’ve paid private contractors to build \$200,000 fully equipped police stations but have failed to coordinate the immediate manning of those stations. As a result, brand-new stations have been stripped to the ground by looters.

He told us that getting things built in Iraq involves fees to various layers of tribal units and that some of those units are getting paid twice for the same work and materiel. Schools, for example, have been built by our contractors who pay off various layers of locals.



En route to the Green Zone on a Black Hawk helicopter.

The “photo is taken” proving that the school has been completed, the checks are cut to the contractor and to the various local “agents” and the locals then lift the blackboards and other supplies, taking them to install in other schools under construction.

He told us of direct waste, like our purchase of supposedly “special” sand for sand bags. He told us that some Iraqi is probably still laughing about selling sand to American armed forces sitting in a desert.

And he told us to remember that the people of the region are schooled traders. The captain opined that family is the only real center of loyalty in Iraq and that traders will swap almost anything else. He suggested that there is evidence that locals are serving as paid agents for insurgent forces (Syrians perhaps), helping to destroy targets in Iraq. When the coalition forces rebuild those targets, the same locals profit from the contracts awarded through the local layers. To combat this phenomenon and to set up an incentive for peace rather than destruction, he suggested that we should rebuild in areas that can prove their quietness rather than rushing reconstruction into hot (and therefore locally profitable) areas.

The captain would have to complete the tutorial with at least one of us ducking for composure. The pilot’s up and down evasive maneuvers had left me maneuvering for a reunion between my stomach and my inner ear. As Rob focused on the discussion at hand, I focused on the floor, head between my legs. By the time the C130 had taxied to a stop I had recovered, but not well enough to keep from leaving my camera on the seat as we deplaned. The captain had negotiated a ride with us on the waiting Black Hawks. Like us, he was headed to the embassy compound in the Green Zone.

The road from the Baghdad International Airport to the Green Zone being too dangerous to travel, we would fly again on Black Hawks. Earplugs expanding in my ears and adjustment made to my vest, I climbed in and took a familiar place behind the gunner on the port side of the helicopter. The blades began to spin faster, and I began to sense that I was in someone else’s seat. An extra gunner was standing by the open door on the port side of the helicopter. I leaned toward him as he leaned toward me. “You need to sit here?” I yelled. As he nodded in the affirmative I slide to my right. Rob Portman and I were now sandwiched between an additional gunner to my left and an additional gunner to his right. The streets of Baghdad were still hot, I concluded.

We lifted off, flying over the bombed out buildings near the airport. The airport environs became urban environs with single-story residences and multi-story apartments below. Water was standing around a number of structures. Electrical service was still sporadic,

and we had learned that Baghdad requires pumps to lower the water table in and around the city. Without those pumps in operation and with many sewer lines having been severed, I cringed at the thought that some of that water was raw sewage.

The roads below had noticeably fewer cars than would be expected in an American city of five million. Off to the left we could see the heart of downtown Baghdad with tall buildings bearing some resemblance to the concentration of downtown Charlotte, North Carolina. Unlike the steel and blue glass look of Charlotte, the Baghdad skyline was painted in sandstone hues.

We were flying fast and in an erratic pattern. Within minutes we were landing in the Green Zone. Armored Suburbans were waiting for us, sanctuaries from the noise and wind of the rotors. We climbed in and began the short ride to another of Saddam's palaces, this one now housing the American embassy. State department staff explained to us en route that the oldest parts of the compound had been built by the British as their embassy. Onto that embassy Saddam had added a palace.

Having heard many reports of attacks in and around the Green Zone I was struck at the cheerfulness of our embassy personnel. Surely, they weren't blissfully unaware that they were living and working in the bull's eyes of the insurgents' targets. Happily, they ushered us through the impressive halls, first finding one of those ornate restrooms in need of a better plumber. Perhaps the Embassy personnel were just adventurous people, I thought as a striking red head on assignment from the White House lead us toward our meeting with Ambassador Negroponte and General Casey. Later, I would conclude that it was their secure sense of mission and purpose that was creating this atmosphere of confidence. They were involved in the work of significance, and they knew that this was their time to write history.

We met with Ambassador Negroponte and General Casey in the Ambassador's office. The General wore desert fatigues over a bulky vest and a leather shoulder holster for his pistol and knife. The Ambassador was more comfortably clad in a white shirt, dark suit pants and a solid, peach-colored tie. In the course of the meeting he would study the large air conditioning vent behind him that was pumping cool air into the room. After a 15 minute discussion with most of our questions being directed to General Casey, the Ambassador would rise to put on his suit coat, partly because of the chilly draft and partly to signal us that it was time to go to the working lunch he had arranged for us with Embassy personnel.

Lunch was individually wrapped plates—half a sub sandwich, vinegar potato chips, and a sugar cookie—set at assigned seats on an



Lunch with Ambassador John Negroponte

ornate 30 foot-long table. Place cards established the location for the Ambassador and his staff on the far side of the table. Guests were positioned on the side nearest the double doors through which we had entered the large room with high ceilings. As we took our seats, it struck me that this and all of Saddam's structures had the feel of homes without a master, of an owner having moved on. But there was emptiness more poignant than the emptiness of a house moved on from. Rather than the echoes of children having grown up and gone, here were remembrances of gunfire and brutality. Those remembrances made the cheerfulness of our embassy staff all the more noticeable in its contrast. Sen. Jim DeMint spoke powerfully of the work of significance that the Americans were doing, expressing for all of us the appreciation due these civilians laboring in a war zone. "It's really up to you," Jim told them. "The strategic victory is at hand. Because of your work here, freedom has the opportunity to take hold in the Middle East."

After lunch we made our way to the Suburbans for the trip to Prime Minister Allawi's office. Ambassador Negroponte would accompany us for the visit and stay with us as we met with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Vice President. As the convoy of Suburbans made its way through the streets of the Green Zone, we noticed that no traffic lights worked. "No electricity to them," our American drivers would report. Even within the Green Zone, the drivers were very aware of the risks of passing parked cars and the occasional delivery truck. In significant contrast to the desert fatigues we'd been seeing, these State Department protection details were in casual street clothes and sunglasses. One wore a Harley Davidson cap. Their job, on 4-month rotations into Iraq from the Washington, DC area, was to protect the Iraqi interim leadership, embassy personnel and visitors.

We arrived at the Prime Minister's office and were shown into a large rectangular room decorated with a painting of Arabian horses. Arrayed along the long walls were burnt orange chairs and love seats separated by small marbled-topped tables. In front of the drapery and sheer covered window at the far end of the rectangle stood two burnt orange chairs, and the Prime Minister motioned to Jim to take the one next to him near the window. In the game of musical chairs that followed, I found myself as the only American seated on the Iraqi side of the room, near the minister of oil and a couple of other ministers. In took only a few seconds and Sen. Sam Brownback's polite beckoning for me to realize that I was supposed to be on the other side of the room. Thankfully, a chair was available and a few steps alleviated the diplomatic pressure.

We were struck at how much Allawi was risking to serve at interim prime minister. Once a Baathist, the prime minister had fallen out with Saddam and been targeted in a nearly successful 1978



Armored Suburban convoy around Green Zone in Baghdad

assassination attempt. Years later, he had returned to Iraq and now was leading his country. In September of 2004 he had spoken to a joint session of the U. S. Congress. The intervening election had made it unlikely that Allawi would continue as prime minister. Later in the day we would meet with his likely successor.

Between servings of guava juice, followed by Turkish coffee, followed by hot tea, we talked with the Prime Minister about his hopes for a peaceful Iraq. We congratulated him on his commitment to religious toleration and on his hope of avoiding a theocratic state. In the course of the discussion, the doors would open and TV crews would enter to film. At the end of the time together, Ambassador Negroponte told the Prime Minister that we would next visit with Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih.

We exited the rectangular room and walked a short distance to the Deputy Prime Minister's office. Salih had been smoking a cigar and his office was scented with smoke. There were chairs enough for all of us in a sitting area beyond his desk and near a curtain-covered window. Salih, a western-educated Kurd, spoke excellent English and demonstrated complete understanding of common vernacular, using phrases like "We want to fast tract that." By then, we had established a pattern for speaking in diplomatic succession: Sen. DeMint, then Sen. Brownback, then Rep. Portman, then Rep. Inglis. Sam was familiar with the Deputy Prime Minister, having worked with him on protecting the Kurdish minority in years past. Religious toleration and avoidance of a theocratic state continued as the dominant themes. The meeting with Allawi and Salih would prove very helpful warm-ups for the more difficult meeting to come.

We said our farewells to Salih and climbed back in the Suburbans to drive to Vice President Jaafari's office in the Green Zone. On the way to meet with Jaafari we were alerted to the significance the Vice President was investing in our visit. We were the first U. S. delegation he had met with, we were told, since securing the endorsement of the Ayatollah Sistani. As the leader of the Shia list with the endorsement of the Ayatollah Sistani, it was clear that Jaafari was now the frontrunner for prime minister. We were all more familiar with Allawi, having heard his significant speech to the Joint Session. And we were quite comfortable with Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, not just because he spoke our language and used our idiom, but because he recognized the beauty of our Constitution's balance of free exercise and non-establishment. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" the First Amendment says, "or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."



Reps. Inglis, Portman, Iraq Vice President Jaafari, and Sens. DeMint. Brownback

On entering the lobby of the building housing Jaafari's office we saw a metal mike stand crowded with microphones and six or eight television cameras ready to roll. We were invited into Jaafari's office and extra chairs were brought in to accommodate staff members from the Embassy and from our own delegation. Speaking through an interpreter except when he grew impatient at the pace of the translation, the Vice President welcomed us and assured us of his commitment to freedom and respect for minorities. He said that democracy is a process toward a growing freedom, and that he was willing to lead that quest.

He then invited us to make statements or ask questions. On cue and without any advance coordination other than sharing the DNA of freedom, the delegation pressed Jaafari on the crucial point of religious toleration. In polite but persistent rotation, each of us asked the same question in different words: "Will you respect religious minorities and will you avoid a theocracy?"

A waiter in white gloves served hot tea and then offered individually wrapped candies and caramels. The questions and significantly longer answers continued with Jaafari speaking mostly through the interpreter but sometimes using his own English. My turn came and I started by affirming his statement that achieving the full freedom of a democracy can be a process. I acknowledged that it took us 100 years to recognize that slavery was woefully inconsistent with the most basic principles of freedom. "But from the start," I continued, "we got it right on religious freedom and toleration."

I reminded him that America was founded in significant part by people fleeing religious persecution, people who had seen the ravages of state-run religion. I pointed out that our strongest proponents of religious toleration were themselves religious minorities in the new land. Mr. Jefferson, I noted, was a deist in a society dominated by Christians.

Referencing the consistent line of questioning from each of us, I summed up by quoting President Bush's inspirational line "Freedom is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to humankind."

"Do you believe that?" I asked. "That freedom is how humans should live?"

Through the interpreter Mr. Jaafari answered in the affirmative, stressing that freedom is a process.

Outside the camera lights were on as we followed Mr. Jaafari out of his office and into the lobby. Not at all certain of what he might say, I happily diverted to the necessary nicely positions midway between the mike stand and the door through which we had entered and



On Black Hawk en route to Fallujah from Baghdad International Airport

through which we would exit. Our escorts had made it clear that the media availability would have to be short, and I wasn't troubled that the diversion would preclude my participation.

We gave Mr. Jaafari our best wishes and got into the Suburbans idling near the door. We were bound for a helicopter pad in another section of the Green Zone where the Black Hawks were waiting to take us back to the Baghdad International Airport.

Soldiers returning from Vietnam sometimes took off their service uniforms in airport bathrooms to avoid being called “baby killers” as they walked through American airports. A story told to me by Beau Shuler of Spartanburg shows that we must have learned something from that atrocity committed against our soldiers back then.

It seems that Beau was in the first class section of an airplane when a soldier returning from Iraq came on board. Beau stood up, asked the soldier for his boarding pass, told him that this seat in the first class section was now the soldier's seat, and moved to the soldier's assigned seat in the back of the plane. Over the next few minutes Beau watched as more soldiers came on board and more first class passengers followed his lead. Before the plane departed, the entire first class section had been emptied of business folks in suits and replaced by soldiers in uniform.

Perhaps now we understand that if we have objections to the decisions of the United States government, we should take up those objections with those who make those decisions and not with those who loyally implement those decisions.

If comedy is the raising and releasing of tension, the last part of the flight on the DeMint-Brownback Black Hawk must have been like a Bob Hope USO show. Everyone in the Black Hawk was aware of the danger below, aware that the streets of Baghdad are among hottest spots remaining in the conflict. The Black Hawk was flying over just such territory when suddenly the pilot took evasive action, veering upward and to the left. Just then a loud bang at the front left sent something flying through the cockpit. Blood appeared on the gunner's legs. The civilians in the Black Hawk thought they had been hit by enemy fire. Just then one of the extra gunners turned to Sen. DeMint and delivered the punch line, “Bird.” The pilot had veered upward to avoid a flock of birds rising to meet the chopper. Unfortunately for at least one of the birds and for the Black Hawk repair crew, it was feathered bird vs. metal bird and the metal bird won, although not without loosing its front left port hole.

Safely on the ground at the Baghdad International Airport, we began to hear the bird story and briefly checked out the damage to the

helicopter. More details would have to come later. Our escorts were hurrying us to the waiting C130 as we were running behind schedule. This time we weren't leaving from Baghdad to our "home" at the Crown Plaza in Kuwait City. We were headed to Amman, Jordan where the Gulfstream V was waiting to take us to Germany to visit the injured.

We walked across the tarmac to the C130 and were greeted by the Air Force Reserve crew from Pittsburgh. They were in Iraq for four months, one of the three rotations that would have them in Iraq for the typical one-year deployment. They expressed appreciation for the way that the Air Force schedules its one-year deployments, noticeably positive about the breaks that would come their way. They gave us the then-familiar briefing about the aircraft—how to exit in case of an on-ground emergency, how to buckle up and how we would be taking evasive action on the way out of Baghdad's air space.

We took off and, as promised, the pilot took evasive action. I was grateful for his more left-to-right style rather than other pilots' up-and-down styles, my stomach and inner ear seemingly better at sideways than up-and-down communication. On the way out, I noticed a particularly sharp final turn to starboard. Later, we would learn from Jim DeMint that a ground heat sensor alarm had sounded in the cockpit, alerting the crew to a potential round having been fired at the plane. Riding in the front, Jim had learned that the sensors also respond to other heat sources on the ground. Seeing no other evidence of a round having been fired at the C130, the pilots had speculated that someone may have been using a welding torch on the ground beneath the plane.

After an hour and 45 minute flight we landed in Amman, Jordan. The cargo door opened, enabling us to see the Gulfstream V that had brought us from Washington to Shannon, Ireland and on to Kuwait City. On board were the same pilots and attendants who had flown us three days before. Now, the same plane and crew would take us to Germany and, after an overnight there, back home to America. As we walked across the tarmac toward the blue and white plane with "United States of America" in large letters on the side, I sensed that we were leaving one world for another. Behind us was a C130 that was being used to transport troops and supplies into and around a war zone. In front of us was a military plane used most often by America's civilian leadership. Behind us were 20 year-old gunners on Black Hawks, a Wall Street banker National Guard Captain, a 45 year-old career soldier, and a striking Marine from Myrtle Beach doing her duty at Camp Fallujah. In front of us were conversations about governing in America and recitations of lessons learned in Iraq. As I walked toward the comfort and safety of the Gulfstream V, I felt a disengagement that would become wrenching in



A bird creates a hole in the helicopter canopy

Germany. The contrast between my circumstances and the circumstances of those doing the work of significance in Iraq was intense and intensifying.

Amman, Jordan was beautiful that night. An orange sun had set beyond high clouds casting a glow on the sandstone structures covering the hills near the airport. The constant beige was punctuated by the glow of green neon lights in the minarets of the mosques. It was cool in the low 50s with a light breeze. As we took off, more and more mosques became visible, their green lights pronounced against the advancing darkness. Pointing to the many mosques, I said to Jim DeMint, “Sort of like Greenville isn’t it—except in Greenville it’s a church on every corner.”

Dinner was served and the four of us started to sort through the day. The five hour flight to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany would give us plenty of time to talk.

We talked of our respect and admiration for our troops and for our embassy personnel. Jim DeMint’s insight about the deference shown to us by our military leadership prompted a discussion of our hope for the same for Iraq. Jim marveled at the significance of civilian control of our military, perhaps the most significant contribution our military makes to our free society.

We talked of our respect for Allawi, Salih and Jaafari—leaders willing literally to risk their lives to serve. We remembered that Jaafari had said that these times were producing Iraq’s founding fathers. We thought of Jaafari’s story of the man who had given his life to protect a voting line by tackling and smothering a suicide bomber. After the explosion had killed both the bomber and the protector, the protector’s family continued in line and voted.

We talked of our hope that Iraq might avoid a theocracy and rehearsed the lines we had used with Jaafari. We talked of faith—our faith—and its impact on our views of public policy. We talked of the blessed balance of free exercise and non-establishment enshrined in the First Amendment to our Constitution. I mentioned the imperative that we—conservative social issue and economic issue Republicans—maintain the balance that we had urged on Jaafari. Having pleaded with him to avoid the establishment of a theocratic state and to extend the state’s protection to those of differing views, I suggested our need constantly to examine our own proposals and methods.

This five hour in-flight discussion would be followed by another nine hour discussion the next day as we flew from Germany to America. I was experiencing what I had heard: that Codels forge deeper



Embassy staff in Baghdad arranges convoy

relationships and better understanding—not just of the land and situation visited but of the fellow travelers.

We landed at Ramstein Air Force Base with fresh snow on the runway. It was near midnight, we were nearly two hours behind schedule and the temperature was in the teens. From my seat on the port side of the plane I could see uniformed Air Force personnel waiting to greet us. I turned to Jim whose seat was across the aisle from mine. “Get ready, Mr. Chairman,” I said, “There’s a red carpet out there and people are standing at attention.” In remarkable confirmation of our discussion about the deference shown by the military to our civilian leadership, the welcoming party included two Air Force generals—Art Lichte, the Vice Commander of U. S. forces in Europe, and Ro Bailey, the commander of the air base wing at Ramstein. The generals and our embassy staff showed us to a warm bus that would take us to our accommodations.

The General Cannon Hotel is located on the Landstuhl side of what was once known as Ramstein-Landstuhl Air Force Base. That side of the base is also home to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the place where the injured from Iraq are treated. For days I had been telling myself that seeing the injured would be the most intense part of the trip, and I was consciously preparing for the impact. I was not prepared for the impact of the General Cannon Hotel.

We checked in to the hotel, a one-story stucco and brown wood structure with German décor, 8 or 9 foot ceilings, a small lobby and a large meeting room off to the left of the lobby. Tomorrow we would have a working breakfast in that room. The hotel was warm and inviting, and we visited briefly with our hosts over chips and salsa in a basement control room. Feeling the effects of the two time zone addition to the day, I made my way up the stairs to the main floor.

As I walked toward my room at the end of the hall, I noticed that the rooms were named more than numbered. A sense of unease came over me as I approached my room on an outside corner of the hotel. What if it were too nice? What if it amplified to the shameful this VIP treatment we were being accorded? What if it were in too great of contrast to the circumstances of our troops back in Iraq? What if the sense of proportionality were all wrong?

My heart sank as I opened the door. An overstuffed love seat and matching chair in blues and browns filled a sitting area oriented toward a built-in mahogany-colored entertainment center. Complementing draperies shielded the room from the cold beyond the picture windows behind the love seat. A mahogany-colored desk occupied the space in the corner formed by the windows. The wall of windows continued toward the right defining the outside of a short hallway leading to a secluded bedroom and bath. I would find out later that the bathrooms in the hotel had recently been redone. A hot water radiator in the bathroom doubled as a towel warmer. I dropped my bags and walked back into the sitting room. There on the coffee table were gift baskets and welcoming notes from our hosts. I was overcome. The world was upside down.

What had I done to deserve this? Why not that Marine who had gone into that house in Fallujah to rescue the four Americans? Why wasn't he here and I there?

I thought of the soldiers I had met who had enlisted so that they could go to college. I thought of how my parents had paid for me to go to college and to law school—an expensive college and an out-of-state law school. I thought of Keith Halseth, my middle-school charge who had served in Desert Storm. My 1991 letter to him had suggested that Congress might substitute service. Somehow, it didn't seem much like service at the General Cannon Hotel. It seemed that I was being served more than serving. It wasn't that rooms like this shouldn't exist; I was certain that it was appropriate for our military to have such facilities. Except for the current occupant in the current circumstances, such rooms were not overdone.

Tomorrow I would learn that the guilt of the non-serving extends to the non-deployed. Tonight, I was aware of the deployed's work of significance, and I was searching for significance for the non-serving. The morning would bring some light on that question as well.

I resolved that I would sleep, that I would consciously turn off the emotions. I knew that emotional stress on top of sleep deprivation was a prescription for a whopper of a cold or flu. So I forced myself to remember what I learned when moving from our first house and how the unexpected emotional stress had left me sick with bronchitis for three weeks. I recalled how the physical stress of that move had been vastly compounded by the emotional upheaval of leaving memories. I remembered cleaning up for the new owners at 2:00 a.m. Alone and wiping the kitchen counter for the last time in the empty house, I had reflected too much on how it had been the house to which 4 of our 5 children had come home at birth and to which we had moved on our eldest's second birthday.

I'd have to stop reflecting in Landstuhl, I told myself. Before I stopped, though, I would pray. I would thank God for His acute awareness that the world is, in fact, upside down. I would thank Him for the story of Lazarus the rich man who had lived in luxury and the beggar now at Abraham's side in heaven. I would thank Him for His unshakable and unalterable determination to set things right. I would thank Him for the Beatitude, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." And I would agree with Him that so should it be. Amen.