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The sights of success

By GRESHAM BARRETT - Guest columnist

War. A simple, three-letter word. No matter how simple it sounds, its true meaning has consequences that can affect cultures, lives and countries not only for the short term but for generations to come.

Iraq and Afghanistan: two places that geographically speaking are miles apart but have a common theme that joins the two in a way that affects not only the Middle East and the United States but, I truly believe, all civilizations.

In this lies a question I asked myself before my recent trip to the region: Is it worth the sacrifice in America's precious resources — our sons and daughters — to stay in these fights to win?

In the five days I recently spent traveling in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan during a congressional tour, I witnessed a response from each country and answered the question for myself.

To answer the question for you, let me tell you of the story of the young Iraqi policeman in Haditha, located in the western Iraq province of Al-Anbar, who was 21 and looked 17, and had been fighting for four years. How he worked side-by-side with U.S. and Iraqi forces to take back his hometown, one house, one street, one town at a time. How proud he was that I could walk in his market — when six months ago, yards away, six Iraqi police were beheaded in front of the crowds to strike fear in the hearts and minds of citizens. And the story of the sheik who offered me a Marlboro Light in the open market to show his support of not only me, but my country.

I could cite the story of Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq Barham Salih and how he told us his government was organizing an anti-corruption council, working with outside entrepreneurs for capital and developing economic groups to talk of changing an Iraq that is open not only to freedom, but to the free market.

I could cite the story of Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, and how he said violence in Afghanistan was down to 40 of the 364 provinces. He spoke of infrastructure projects, specifically road work, worked on by the U.S. and coalition forces cutting travel from literally days to hours.

And finally, I could cite the experience I had on the side of the Kunar River, while watching a group of Afghans swing sledgehammers, breaking rocks for retaining walls. How a young Afghan gazed at me with a serious and stern look, swung the 20-lb. sledgehammer five times to break a rock, looked back up at me with a smile that could have spanned the river and gave me a thumbs-up.

I mention these stories, and know hundreds more exist, to stress this fact: We are winning! Detractors will say that for any successes there are also setbacks, and I would be untruthful if I didn't concede some of that. There is so much more to do in both countries. So many more goals and plans to implement — but I saw, lived and breathed these successes, and I have to tell these stories.

I believe with all my heart that failure is not an option, and winning, even with its high cost, is the only acceptable outcome.

To sum it up, one of my Democratic colleagues on the trip expressed to me how much more important to him, believe it or not, it was to have success on a road in Afghanistan than widening a road in his district. I turned and said to him that it's a choice of a road of convenience — or a highway to freedom.

These stories of my encounters helped me answer my question I posed at the beginning — is this worth the cost? To which I give a serious, thoughtful and resounding "yes it is."