



Freedom's Children and the Work of Significance in Iraq

Editor's note: This is the first 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 1:

Optimism and Inspiration

Thursday, February 24 and Friday, February 25, 2005

Andrews Air Force Base to Shannon, Ireland to Kuwait City, Kuwait to Camp Arifjan

A world away at the Crown Plaza Hotel, Kuwait City, I replayed the scenes from the first day of my first "Codel." In my first six years in Congress (1993 to 1998) I hadn't traveled once. House Speaker Newt Gingrich had told us during those years that if we weren't traveling, we weren't doing our jobs right. Convinced by my 6 years out of office that the former Speaker was right, I had resolved to travel to Iraq as soon as possible after the 2004 election. I wanted to encourage the troops, to see the circumstances "on the ground" and to have the opportunity to meet with the government forming in Iraq. All of those objectives would be met in the days that were to come.

It was now 10:30 on Friday night, Kuwait City time. A bright just-past-full-moon lighted the Crown Plaza pool nine stories below. Out on the sparsely traveled streets there were stragglers from Kuwait's on-going 4-day weekend celebration of independence from Britain in 1961 and liberation from Iraq in 1991. Down the hall Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC) was in the "control room" answering questions from our Air Force escorts, Colonel John Ellsworth, Major Cathy Haverstock and Master Sergeant Shawn Baldy. Hardly a frequent flyer himself, Jim was adjusting to his role as the chairman of this congressional delegation ("Codel" in code). "What if

Congressman Portman’s commercial flight into Kuwait City is delayed tomorrow?” they were asking him.

Clearly, we didn’t want to leave Rob. From the start, it was obvious that this would be an extremely cohesive Codel. Jim had been one of the means of the miracle that had landed me in the House in 1992 and he had succeeded me as South Carolina’s Fourth District representative. Now, I was succeeding him, returning to the Fourth District seat after Jim’s elevation to the Senate in a remarkable \$9 million race that was the most expensive in South Carolina’s history. Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) had come to the House as one of the Majority Makers in the Class of 1994 and had moved up to the Senate in 1996. Representative Rob Portman (R-OH) had arrived in the House in 1993, joining my freshman class half-way through our first Congress. We all knew and liked each other. There would be no jockeying for position on this trip, none of the usual “Let’s-figure-out-how-we-all-fit-in-here” tension that attends strangers.

We were certain that Rob would make it, and the morning would prove our confidence. Tonight we were weary but sleep was questionable. The 8 hour time change had thrown us off and our hotel was in that night’s landing pattern for the nearby Kuwait City International Airport. Throughout the night American military transports roared in overhead. Our escorts helped us identify the planes by their sounds. I was certain that the first C5A I had heard was a missile, but throughout the night I would grow accustomed to its characteristic whistle and whine.

We had left at 5:00 p.m. EST on Thursday, February 24 from Andrews Air Force Base on a beautiful Gulfstream V. It was the first time I had ever flown on a plane with “United States of America” emblazoned on the side. I was keenly aware of the representational significance of that insignia when we stopped to re-fuel in Shannon, Ireland. We were a delegation of Senate and House members representing the United States to our own citizens and to citizens of other countries. After walking around the Shannon airport, we re-boarded our Gulfstream V and continued on to Kuwait City, sleeping most of the way but rising for breakfast over Turkey and Iraq. We flew across the mountains of Turkey and northern Iraq and then followed the Tigris River down past Baghdad and on to Kuwait City. As we flew along the Tigris, Sen. Sam Brownback mused about Abraham setting out from that place at God’s command to travel to the land promised. Abraham’s journey—at least in its physical aspects—was harder than ours at 40,000 feet, though our war zone destination made clear our need for guiding Grace in the journey through our times.



(L-R) Rep. Rob Portman, (Ohio-2), Rep. Bob Inglis, (SC-4), Sen. Jim DeMint (SC), Sen. Sam Brownback (KS) — all members of a congressionally approved delegation trip to Iraq or Codel.

We arrived at Kuwait City in a winter thunderstorm, a phenomenon of the wet season there. After an aborted landing we circled and bumped for 40 minutes or so, leaving some of us a bit queasy when we finally got to the ground. Limited visibility cancelled our planned Black Hawk flight to Camp Arifjan and our escorts decided to drive the 45-minute distance instead. Once there, we toured the facility that retrofits Humvees with armored plating, did live-to-tape interviews with home-state TV and then ate with the troops in the mess hall. A group of 8 South Carolina National Guardsmen told me about their work guarding convoys into Iraq and back. The danger of those convoys over roads laced with improvised explosive devices would become more real to us in the days to come.

Exhausted but exhilarated, I tried to sleep. I was overwhelmed by the dedication, the determination, the confidence of America's soldiers. It was as though it had never entered their minds that this wasn't going to work, that freedom's destiny is pricey but certain. I lay there in confidence, grateful for their optimism and prayerful that the God of Jacob would protect freedom's children as they her progenitors would be: Psalm 20.

