



Freedom's Children and the Work of Significance in Iraq

Editor's note: This is the fourth 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, SC-4

Day 4: "I was just doing my job, sir."

Monday, February 28, 2005

Landstuhl, Germany to Washington, DC to Greenville-Spartanburg, SC

Breakfast was down the hall. I gathered my bags, dropped them in the small lobby and entered the large meeting room. The room formed another outside corner of the hotel. Sheers on the picture windows and standard ceiling heights made the room warm against the single digit temperatures outside. I resisted the impulse to open the sheers so that we could all enjoy the cobalt blue skies.

U. S. Air Force Europe Commander General Foglesong talked to us about the siting of bases and the need to have swift and mobile forces. I was impressed by his call for versatility and thankful that we had folks like him leading.

Geeta Pasi, Deputy Consul General of the U. S. Consulate in Frankfurt, talked to us about German perceptions of the war in Iraq and about internal conditions in Germany. We heard about a social security system in worse trouble than our own, a healthcare system straining under its many promises and a social services network that is overburdened.

We discussed the possibility that German aversion to the war may have been a useful diversion from these domestic troubles. And we characterized the European dislike for President Bush as “irrational,” a characterization that I immediately doubted but didn’t dispute.

“What if Germans are rational in disliking the very things that many Americans like about George Bush?” I thought to myself. “The President’s detractors deride his ‘Don’t-mess-with-Texas’ foreign policy. Gone, they would say, is the ‘humble’ foreign policy he suggested during the 2000 campaign.”

At first it seemed disloyal: Giving credence to the criticism of a recalcitrant ally? Breaking ranks with the united Republican front? Doing so while on foreign soil?

“Follow it,” I said to myself. “There’s something here—an insight about diplomacy and politics and their part in the work of significance.”

As Geeta Pasi, our Deputy Consul General, continued her presentation, I continued my sidebar soliloquy: “So this, too, is work of significance. Diplomacy and politics matter. This woman, this diplomat, is here representing our country, explaining us to other people and learning about ourselves by seeing our reflection in another country’s mirror. Done well, this work might avert the need for the military work of significance.”

I thought of Joe Nye’s book *Soft Power* and the presentation he had done in December 2004 at the Kennedy School’s orientation for new members of the 109th Congress. I had found his analysis in Boston insightful; now in Germany I was finding it affirming. I recalled his description of three bases of power: hard power (the crucial war-fighting capabilities we had seen in the reenactment of the battle of Fallujah); buy-them-off power (my shorthand of Dr. Nye’s more eloquent description of the kind of power we develop by using foreign aid to build relationships); and soft power (the most powerful of the three and the kind we achieve when other countries embrace our ideals as their own).

I was settled in the opinion that Iraq and Afghanistan were places to use hard power, and I was inspired by the folks who were applying that power on our behalf. Theirs was a work of significance. I thought of the 45-year old on his way back into Iraq, and I would continue to wish that I had joined him in that work of significance. I would continue to wish that I could rewind the scenes of my life and add that chapter.

Here, talking to this diplomat, was another alternate destiny. I was certain that the Congress and the President had taken the right course in Iraq and Afghanistan. But what if we were able



Arrival at Landstuhl, Germany

to do an even better job of using words and demeanor and texture to win soft power? What if we had avoided the mistake of treating detainees at Guantanamo Bay as enemy non-combatants? Might we have avoided the abuse at Abu Ghraib? What if the future were to call on us to convince fellow Americans to rebuild places like Fallujah? What if President Bush's vision of democracy in the Middle East is proven right?

I had gone to Iraq thinking, "Mr. President, I believe. Help my unbelief." I was leaving more convinced of the power of freedom and more aware of the potential greatness of the President's vision of democracy for the Middle East. I had come to Germany regretting my lack of service. I was in Germany now aware of the value of other service—service involving words and demeanor and texture.

The briefings were over and we boarded a bus for a 10-minute ride to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. Along the way Colonel Kory Cornum, Commander of the 435th Medical Squadron, talked to us about the advantages of stabilizing the injured in field hospitals, transporting them as quickly as possible to the full service facilities at Landstuhl, and relocating them to the U. S. for rehabilitation or extended care. Colonel Cornum explained that in previous conflicts the injured stayed longer in field hospitals. Advances in medical machinery, especially the reduction of size and weight, have made it possible to transport the injured more quickly, thereby reducing the time spent in the difficult environment of the typical field hospital.

As we drove onto the hospital grounds, we learned that the Landstuhl Medical Center was first built by the Nazis. Unlike the private-room towers typical of state-side hospitals, Landstuhl's multiple-patient rooms are housed in dozens of detached buildings joined by enclosed walkways. Separating structures was common during World War II in order to minimize damage from bombing raids, our embassy staff explained. Later we would learn that most of the rooms at Landstuhl are not air-conditioned, making conditions difficult during the few but predictable hot weeks of the German summer.

Our bus came to a halt in the circular asphalt drive which ambulances use to transport the injured from plane-side to hospital door. We were met by Colonel Cornum's wife—herself a Colonel. Mrs. Colonel Cornum, the Commander of the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, welcomed us and explained that Mr. Colonel Cornum would show us through the intensive care ward as well as some patient wards.

Starting down the hall and through the double-doors was as intense as I had anticipated. In the weeks leading up to our trip I had learned that one of my son's classmates from Travelers Rest High School had lost an arm in Iraq and was now in rehabilitation at Walter Reid. I had been coaching myself for this visit with the injured, but I wasn't sure that my preparation would extend to seeing a 19 year-old from the Class of 2003 here at Landstuhl. Thankfully, I wouldn't be tested on that point as the warriors we would see would be fathers and husbands in their twenties or thirties.

I knew that Jim, Sam and Rob had been preparing as well. All of us were speechmakers, but words were now doubtful acquaintances. I knew that 'Thank you for your service' were the right words to say, but how could those words be infused with awareness and appreciation sufficient for this circumstance? "How do you thank someone who volunteered to step into the firefights of freedom?" I wondered. "What do you say to someone who has taken bullets to make your home, your kids more free and secure? If we met someone who had lost a limb, what words could simultaneously express sufficient awareness of the loss, ample appreciation of the sacrifice and reasonable hope in the face of unknowable impairment?"

The first was a dark haired, 6-foot, 210 pound father from Savannah; alert but on oxygen. He attempted a wave with his hand but was restrained by an IV tube. Two male attendants stood to his right writing on charts and adjusting equipment. We had piled up at the doorway but our feet began to follow our hearts, and we started into the room. "You can't come in, sirs" one of the attendants reminded us as he pulled on his own scrubs with his gloved hand. "You'd have to be in these."

We thanked him for the reminder and took a half step back toward the door. "What happened?" Sen. Sam Brownback asked the soldier, pointing toward the gashes on his tattooed torso. Ignoring the smaller abrasions, the soldier looked toward his right rib cage, "They got me here in the side, sir." A bandage partially covered an entry wound. The vests are good, we would hear as we walked toward the next room, but they don't give 100% coverage.

Back in the hallway, we made our way around the nurse's station and toward two rooms off to the left. The soldier in the first room was sleeping or unconscious, and we stood in the hallway as a Captain talked of his team's care for the injured. In the room to the right, each labored cough from the injured soldier was met with an encouragement from the nurse to "Get it out; cough it up."



Sens. DeMint, Brownback, Rep. Inglis are briefed at outbound transport staging area, Landstuhl, Germany

Our guides showed us out of the intensive care ward and toward a building of patient rooms. As we walked through an enclosed breezeway the Colonel explained that additional areas had become intensive care units during the peak times of the conflict—peaks like the Battle of Fallujah.

In the patient wings, we could enter the rooms for closer contact with our soldiers. A Texan lay in his bed, his left foot extending beyond the covers. The foot was in a cast with a protruding adjustable wire. There was writing on the cast, and I could make out the word “amputated” followed by a question mark. Fearing that the words “To be” may have been covered by the sheets, we knew not to ask for the prognosis. “I just hope they don’t kick me out of the Army because of it, sir,” the soldier said, nodding toward his foot. “I really want to stay in. The Army’s my life. I hope they can find a place for me.” Later, we would be relieved to learn that—contrary to previous practice—our armed forces now make it possible for amputees to remain in service.

Nearby, a soldier wasn’t accepting our most sincere attempt at thanks. “I was just doing my job, sir.” It was a refrain we would grow accustomed to hearing as we went room to room. The last soldier we visited lay under covers watching a TV screen that was positioned close to his face, legs elevated. Sen. Sam Brownback approached him on his left side, greeting him in Spanish. The obviously Hispanic soldier looked at Sam blankly, seemingly not understanding. As the conversation progressed Sam turned off the television and moved the screen so that we could see the man’s face more clearly. Becoming more alert, the soldier told us of an improvised explosive device going off as he and others crossed near a culvert. The explosion, we gathered, had taken both of his legs below his knees. Others had been killed, he reported. We wondered if this might have been the incident that caused the caskets to be in the back of our C-130 earlier in the week. We searched for words, but they seemed shallow.

“Have any kids?” I asked, searching for something to add depth to this brief moment of relationship.

“One, sir.”

“Boy or girl?” I asked.

“It’s a boy,” he said, sounding more like an ecstatic delivery-room dad announcing the future to the world than the father of a toddler. He had been deployed for most of his little guy’s life, I reasoned; so it was natural that he would still be using the words and inflection of the delivery room dad.

“Looking forward to seeing him?” someone asked.

“Yes, sir,” the soldier answered, words becoming inadequate for him as well.

As we walked back toward the front of the hospital and to our waiting bus, the Colonel told us that the camaraderie in the patient wards aids the healing process and that the semi-private rooms help facilitate conversations between patients similarly situated. Particularly for amputees, he said, it's better that they not be alone and that they have someone nearby who can empathize.

We thanked the Colonel and the staff for their work, using words that remained inadequate. These were the caregivers coping with the devastation of war and destruction. Compounding that, the Colonel explained, the staff at Landstuhl rarely gets to see anyone complete the recovery process. Since the injured are relocated to the U. S. for further treatment and rehabilitation, the treatment cycle is necessarily and desirably (for the patient's sake) interrupted. "We do get some email updates from the state-side caregivers, telling us about the progress of some patients," the Colonel said. "That helps. And we've had a few visits from soldiers who have been treated here. That's huge for us."

In these caregivers we were seeing yet another facet of the work of significance. I knew that I would be inspired by the stories of the soldiers from the frontlines, but I had not anticipated the work of significance among the caregivers. I was learning in Landstuhl the significance of support. We were seeing the faces and the hands of those caring for the frontline fighters. They too were freedom's children doing work of significance. They wouldn't have realized it, but they were now supporting me, providing proof of service beyond the frontlines of hard power. Lunch would add further affirmation.

Lunch was on base in a facility that was a cross between a small dining hall of a small college and a fast food restaurant—complete with a curved glass outcropping providing seating for 40 or so. We sat in the glass outcropping with home state airmen and women, some in Air Force blues, some in fatigues. At the South Carolina table, Jim was at one end and I was at the other. Around us were ten South Carolinians performing various supporting roles around the Ramstein base. At the moment, their roles were different than the roles of the soldiers we had seen in Iraq. All of them had volunteered to serve and all of them were subject to being deployed to places like Iraq.

Later Sen. Jim DeMint would recount the rehabilitation needed at his end of the table after he had asked, "Any of you been in Iraq?" After all eyes had hit the table, Jim went to work affirming the non-deployed. They were doing the work of freedom here in Ramstein, he told them. "Those who are



Sen. Brownback, Rep. Inglis, Sen. DeMint, Rep. Portman with the staff at the Ramstein hospital during congressional delegation visit

on the front lines are depending on you,” he reasoned. “They can’t do what they do without you doing what you do.” Jim’s experience would advance my understanding that the guilt of the non-serving extends to the non-deployed.

“Everybody’s got their role to play,” I would hear later in this long day from Jason Morris, my legislative director. His words would carry significance as he drove me from Andrews Air Force Base to Washington’s Dulles International Airport to catch a flight home to South Carolina. It would be his first official day of work on Capitol Hill, coinciding with his separation from active duty Air Force and his commissioning in the Air Force Reserves. As we drove, I would begin to describe lessons learned in Iraq. I would express my deep admiration for those—like him—willing to serve, and I would repeat my wish that I had served. He would have unique standing to validate substitute service in Congress. My first run for Congress had produced a congressman who had nominated him to the Air Force Academy. Years later, he was now serving as my legislative director.

After lunch with the troops we returned to the basement hospitality room at the General Cannon Hotel for an hour of downtime prior to our flight home. Jim, Sam and Rob would use the time to work out; I would sleep in the bedroom in the hospitality suite.

A brief bus ride took us from the hotel to the runway where our Gulfstream V was waiting. General Lichte and General Bailey joined us plane-side, thanking us for coming and wishing us well. As the engines started pushing us away, Colonel Ellsworth motioned toward the windows on the port side of the plane. “They’re giving you a salute, sirs.” Outside the two generals were saluting our plane.

It was snowing at Andrews Air Force Base when we landed. The 10 hour flight had been extended by a 45-minute weather delay at Andrews and, on our body clocks, by a 6-hour time change. We had talked the whole way but it seemed that there was still more to say.

We had seen America’s finest doing work of significance in Iraq. We had seen heroes, support troops and caregivers in Germany. We had seen embassy personnel in Kuwait, Iraq and Germany. We were returning to President Bush’s selection of Rep. Rob Portman as U. S. Trade Representative, to Sen. Jim DeMint’s leading role in the Social Security debate and to Sen. Sam Brownback’s consideration of a presidential bid in 2008. And we were returning to those making possible the work of significance—teachers, businesses large and small, moms and dad, spouses and really good plumbers.



The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. . . . Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? . . . As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

Portions of 1 Corinthians 12: 12-20