

This week General David Petraeus, U.S. Army, Commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the Ambassador to Iraq, returned to Washington D.C. to brief the House and Senate on the significant progress being made in Iraq. As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, I was able to participate in the hearings, and I was pleased with what I heard. The success of the surge is undeniable, but the situation in Iraq is still fragile. They provided a candid assessment of the situation in Iraq and left little doubt in my mind that victory will be achieved if we maintain our resolve and allow our troops to finish the job. That is the key however; we must finish the job.

During General Petraeus' testimony on Wednesday to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Wexler asked a detailed and direct series of questions regarding the definition of victory in Iraq. Specifically, he asked how we will define victory in Iraq so that we can bring the war to a close. He said to General Petraeus, "Please tell us, General, what is winning?" As your Congressman, it is my duty to report to you the relevant and important findings and answers from Wednesday's testimony;

you deserve to hear firsthand the facts from the commander on the ground in Iraq.

General Petraeus succinctly stated that we, as a nation, are fighting for our national interest. He said that, "we are fighting to ensure that Al Qaeda, the sworn enemy of the United States and the free world, does not establish strongholds in Iraq.

We are fighting to prevent the possible spread of sectarian conflict in Iraq, conflict that had engulfed the country and taken it to the brink of civil war. Our nation is fighting to promote regional stability in a region that is of critical importance to the global economy, and we are engaging Iraq to defeat the influence of Iran, a nation that is a very important and dangerous element in the region."

General Petraeus also explained what it is we are trying to achieve in Iraq. He stated that we are attempting to establish an Iraq that is at peace with itself and with its neighbors.

We are working to establish a country that can defend itself and allow a government to operate that is reasonably representative and broadly responsive to its citizens.

Lastly, one of our goals is to enable Iraq to be engaged in the global economy.

General Petraeus went on to say that he and Ambassador Crocker are minimalists in that they are not after the "Holy Grail" or a "Jeffersonian Democracy" in Iraq.

General Petraeus stated that, "we are after achieving a condition that would allow our soldiers to disengage--that is what we are doing as we achieve progress with the surge, which is allowing us to, in turn, withdraw the surge forces. This success will allow us to withdraw 25% of our ground combat power, 5 of 20 Brigade Combat Teams, 2 Marine Battalions, and an entire Marine Expeditionary Unit by July of this year." My mission as your Congressman is to keep you informed of important decisions, actions, and facts affecting our country and your families, and what better way to do it than to share the words of the commander who has had "boots on the ground" for the last four and a half years.

Over the past year, the United States, and more importantly, the Iraqi people have made significant political and military progress. Militarily, our efforts have resulted in tremendous gains throughout Iraq. We are witnessing a consistent reduction in coalition fatalities, while civilian casualties have decreased by 70% since June of 2007. This represents a significant shift in the right direction compared to before the surge.

More importantly, the Iraqi Security Forces have matched our efforts, and we have seen their ranks grow in size, ability, and loyalty. Additionally, the emergence of Awakening Councils have provided a much needed boost within individual communities, assisting Coalition Forces with an additional support system in confronting localized threats. These developments have allowed our troops to meet the challenge of stabilizing neighborhoods and aiding the community in their rebuilding efforts. As a result, nearly 80% of all Iraqis feel their neighborhood is safe and secure.

Politically, the Iraqi people have had a number of noteworthy developments. Political leaders have passed several key pieces of legislation aimed at bringing the country together, notably the Accountability and Justice Law that allowed former Ba'ath party members to return to the Government. This will be an important step in the reconciliation process and demonstrated willingness by all parties involved to compromise on a difficult issue. Additional laws have been passed to address Sunni grievances and in February, a record \$49.9 billion budget was passed. The Prime Minister and key lawmakers are currently working towards resolutions on several key pieces of legislation, including laws that deal with elections and the development of Iraq's energy policies. These topics are difficult issues that will require concessions by all sides, but based on past experience, I am hopeful that Iraqi leaders will find solutions that will benefit every Iraqi citizen.

There is still much to be done and we can not take the successes of the last year for granted. We must be vigilant and determined in our efforts and stand firm with the Iraqi people in their hour of need. We must also insist that the Iraqi government continues to take charge of their country's future and that the Iraqi military forces continue to take an increased role in the safety and security of their country.