

Editorials

Seeing Iraq with 'fresh eyes'

In his third trip to war-torn Iraq, Virginia Congressman Frank Wolf, R-10th, kept asking the one question that should guide any future policy decisions on how long to keep American troops there. "The last question I asked everybody is: 'What would the ramifications be if we fail?'" to establish a stable democracy, Rep. Wolf told *The Examiner*.

All the Iraqis he talked to, who will be voting on a new constitution later this month, already knew the answer to that one: Slaughter in the streets of Baghdad, they told him. But even if the United States were willing to let Iraq splinter apart in a bloody civil war — with Somalia-like chaos and mass ethnic butchery similar to the mayhem that erupted in the former Yugoslavia — that would still not be the end of U.S. involvement.

An Iraq civil war would likely "destabilize the Jordanian and Saudi governments," Wolf told us. That in turn would threaten Middle Eastern oil production, causing the price of oil to rise even higher and further batter an American economy now wrestling with significant damage to part of its domestic drilling and refining capability caused by Hurricane Katrina. The inevitable fuel shortages would jeopardize economic expansion and threaten jobs.

That would be the least of our problems. With Kurds retreating to the north and Shiites likely forming a southern alliance with the Iranians — who recently refused to halt their nuclear weapons program — the remaining "Sunni Triangle" surrounding Baghdad would become a "safe harbor for terrorists, similar to what the Taliban provided in Afghanistan," Wolf theorized. In other words, a great place for al-Qaida to train more terrorists and plan more attacks.

Besides destroying its own credibility, leaving Iraq too early practically guarantees the U.S. will have to return later, perhaps facing an even stronger enemy with chemical, biological and



Karim Kadim/AP

A woman stands next to a man reading Iraqi newspapers bearing a photo of Saddam Hussein on the front page on Sept. 5 in Baghdad.

nuclear weapons at its disposal, says Wolf — one of the first members of Congress to warn about the danger posed by Osama bin Laden and author of the legislation creating the National Commission on Terrorism.

"There are many positive things happening in Iraq," Wolf told us. "I saw with my own eyes real progress being made on several fronts," including construction of schools, hospitals, utilities and police stations. However, much of the good news, he says, is never reported by a news media that's "locked in the green zone" because it's too dangerous for reporters to roam the countryside. The real fear among Iraqi civilians also is palpable, as evidenced by the deadly stampede on Aug. 31 — the same day Katrina struck — which killed some 1,200 mostly Shiite pilgrims heading to a shrine across the Tigris River triggered by mere rumors of a suicide bomber in the crowd.

"The Iraqi people are exhausted," Wolf said, having to deal with insurgents who are primarily Baathists still loyal to former President Saddam Hussein or foreign nationals who

slip across the Syrian border to wage jihad. If Iraq had no connection with international terrorists when the U.S. invaded, as critics of the war maintain, the same cannot be said now. Even U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan lamented the fact that Iraq had now become a major hub of terrorism, calling the situation there "worse" than it was in Afghanistan.

"Patience is the key to our success in Iraq," Wolf maintains, but Americans' patience is fraying. The chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the State Department believes that a special task force of distinguished Americans should be immediately dispatched to Iraq to view the situation with "fresh eyes" — and then report back to Congress and the American people. "If this war is lost," Wolf warns, "it will not be in Baghdad, but in the United States."

With stakes this high, President George W. Bush would be very foolish to disregard Wolf's thoughtful proposal. It's time to tell the American people exactly what's at stake in Iraq — and explain why we must stay the course.