

A coalition led by the United States began a military strike against Iraq on March 19, 2003. By ignoring President Bush's ultimatum to leave Iraq, Saddam Hussein exhausted his final opportunity to avoid removal by force. Military engagement became necessary to prevent Hussein from threatening the United States and its allies.

I supported President Bush in his efforts to build an international coalition through the United Nations and supply Congress with evidence supporting the case for regime change in Iraq. Unfortunately, the United Nations failed to enforce the Security Council resolution that required Saddam Hussein to disarm, thus making it necessary for the United States to act with force.

I commend the determination of President Bush and the courage of every American in uniform in Iraq who contributed to the defeat and capture of this murderous tyrant and continue to support our commander in chief as he works to establish a free and democratic Iraq.

My thoughts and prayers also remain with the brave men and women deployed to the Middle East and around the globe. We cannot lose sight of the fact that many of them are being separated from their families during this difficult time.

In April of 2003, I personally thanked many of the soldiers for their ongoing heroism. My wife, Karen, and I traveled to the Middle East with Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives J. Dennis Hastert and a small congressional delegation to visit with servicemen and women injured while participating in operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. We met soldiers at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany, aboard an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean and at Fairford Air Force Base outside of London.

To coincide with the trip, we asked Hoosiers to send my office postcards with their expressions of gratitude, words of encouragement and promises of prayer to the troops. Dubbed "Operation Thank You," Karen and I distributed the more than 12,000 postcards to the soldiers and sailors we met.

In addition, in March of 2004, I traveled with another small congressional delegation to visit our troops in Iraq. In addition to meeting and encouraging our troops, including several from Indiana, we met with Ambassador Paul Bremer and local Iraqi leaders.

The candor and passion of these local Iraqis who are working so hard to bring democracy to their country was amazing.

During our meeting with the top civil and religious leaders of Basra, I asked what they thought of our action to remove Saddam Hussein. What had been a cool, if not distant, atmosphere suddenly erupted in a flourish of candor and passion. A local Muslim leader whose dress and appearance gave him an ancient air, said icily, "Saddam Hussein was a nightmare." Another said, "with Saddam's fall, it was as though a dark curtain had been lifted from Iraq and daylight could now shine in on our people." They spoke of the challenges of crime and foreign influences in their transition to democracy. And they spoke with affection for one another, Shiite Muslim

and Christian, and the long history of religious tolerance in their community.

Our weekend in Iraq also included a meeting with Ambassador Bremer, who was involved in putting the finishing touches on the new Iraqi Constitution. It was quite amazing to see the draft of the constitution laid out in front of us. It was like having coffee with James Madison across the street from the Philadelphia Statehouse in the summer of 1787!

Heroes and the future of the Middle East are being forged every day in Iraq. And while much work is left to be done, after seeing firsthand the challenges and opportunities facing the Iraqi people, I am more confident than ever in the justness of our cause. I remain confident that if we will demonstrate the idealism and perseverance that I witnessed among the men and women serving in our armed forces, our allies and the good people of Iraq, we will not fail.