

Wednesday, March 05, 2008

## RETURN TO IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN



*Congressional delegation to Iraq and Afghanistan*

February 28-March 4, 2008, I participated in a bipartisan congressional delegation to Iraq and Afghanistan. In four days, we took off and landed twenty different times in four different types of aircraft. We flew to Kuwait in a military jet, flew into Iraq on a cargo plane, flew around Iraq and Afghanistan in helicopters and Ospreys. We convoyed in military vehicles throughout both countries. It was a rare opportunity to meet with leaders and locals in both theaters of combat and I am grateful to the people of Indiana and our military leaders for making it possible.

Our visit took place before a backdrop of several major events. The Iraqi government announced that Ali Hassan al-Majid, better known as "Chemical Ali," a brutal military henchman of Saddam Hussein, will be executed later this month. We arrived in the Kurdish Region in Northern Iraq just as Turkish forces announced their withdrawal from military operations within that region. And our second day in Iraq coincided with the first official state visit to Iraq by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It was a time of great significance to the people of Iraq in several respects.

During our time in Iraq and Afghanistan, one inescapable conclusion emerged. After years of difficulty and setback in varying degrees, freedom is making progress in Iraq and Afghanistan. In northern Iraq, known as the Kurdish Region, there is security, political progress and economic growth. In central Iraq, following the military surge, Al Qaeda and insurgent violence are in steep decline and political progress is beginning to take hold.

As we saw firsthand in Baghdad and Al Anbar Province, the military surge and Sunni cooperation have resulted in extraordinary progress in security, but those gains are fragile. Violence in Iraq has declined more than 60 percent since the beginning of the surge and has remained at relatively low levels since November of last year. The Iraqi Parliament has passed legislation that may make further political progress possible. Our visit was characterized by a cautious optimism from American military leaders to ordinary Iraqis on the street.

Afghanistan was equally encouraging. In President Hamid Karzai, we saw the determination of a leader devoted to his people and to defeating a resurgent Taliban effort to overturn their progress with terrorist violence. In Kuna Province, we witnessed the greatest threat to the terrorists who operate on the border with Pakistan: a bridge being built by local Afghans. Seeing locals waving at our convoy and greeting laborers at this remote construction site showed me the depth of American generosity and the resilience of their proud people.

What follows is a summary of each of our stops for your review. If the prose seems a bit disjointed at times, please forgive me. I wrote many of the passages thumbing my Blackberry

on military aircraft. I hope my firsthand impressions can convey the experience and enrich your understanding of the importance of American involvement in both countries.--Mike Pence

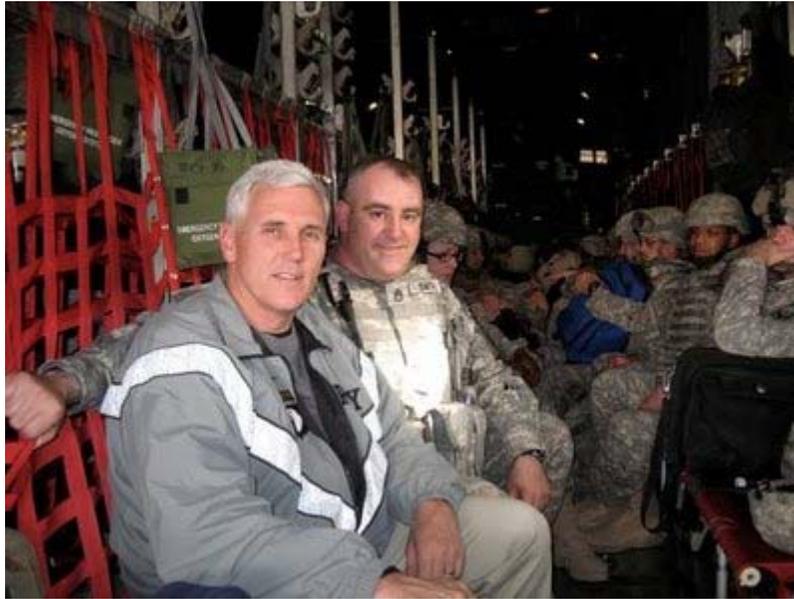
### **Day One: Kurdish Region of Iraq and Baghdad**

We rose at 4:45 a.m. to witness a crescent moon over the Persian Gulf. The leader of our delegation, Congressman Jim Costa of California, asked if I might "continue a tradition" we had established on previous trips into this war zone and offer a word of prayer. Remembering our troops and our families back home, I asked especially that we might be an encouragement to the soldiers and Iraqis we would meet, and we were on our way.

This day we would visit a part of Iraq that is seemingly free of Al Qaeda terrorism and is attracting foreign investment...we would visit the Kurdish Regional Government.

Driving to our waiting aircraft, a C-130 operated by the Air National Guard, we received a briefing about the politics of the Kurdish Region of Northern Iraq and the trials through which ethnic Kurds passed under the rule of Saddam Hussein. Hussein's violence against the Kurds was among the worst in modern history. In 1988, Hussein used chemical weapons against this population and killed thousands in a single night.

We boarded the huge C-130 cargo aircraft and took our seats on the canvas benches that line the interior wall. In all my trips to Iraq, I always begin in the belly of these cargo planes, surrounded by men and women in uniform, inbound to the front lines of the War on Terror. It is a great privilege to enter a war zone alongside those who are carrying the burden of this battle.



*Pence on C130 With Hoosier soldier, SSG William J. Smith*

After landing in Irbil, our motorcade made its way from the developed streets of this Kurdish city through the winding roads in the foothills of the mountains that divide Iraq and Turkey.

We arrived at the remote mountain compound of the president of the Kurdish Region of Northern Iraq.

President Massoud Barzani greeted us outside his ornate office and ushered us in. The president was dressed in traditional Kurdish apparel, head-dress and open-collared suit with the color and appearance of a military officer.

The regional president began our discussion expressing his appreciation for the sacrifices of American soldiers. He also thanked us for taking time to visit the Kurdish area. I believe we are only the fourth delegation of American congressmen to visit this area of Iraq in the past four years.

I told President Barzani of my longstanding admiration for his people, given how difficult a trial they endured under Saddam Hussein. The president seemed most moved when I mentioned our nation's enduring sadness at the tragedy visited upon his people in the chemical attack on the city of Halabja by Saddam Hussein in 1988.



*Congressman Pence with President Barzani, Kurdish Region of Iraq*

His eyes narrowed and he nodded slowly as I spoke of the justice that will be served on Ali Hassan al-Majid, better known as "Chemical Ali". Hours before we arrived, it was announced that the man who organized that attack on defenseless Kurds would be executed before the end of the month.

When I asked him why Iraqi Kurdistan had been almost entirely free of insurgent or Al Qaeda violence, he responded, "the culture is the difference." He alluded to a long tradition among Kurdish people of respecting religious and ethnic differences.

In the end, our time with this sturdy regional president was telling. His quiet confidence and success in achieving stability in this region is a model for all of Iraq now and in the future.

Back in Irbil, our next meeting was with Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The prime minister greeted us at his personal residence in the heart of the city. Educated in Iran, the youthful prime minister spoke fluent English and had a distinctly western air about him. During our formal discussions, he spoke of his gratitude for our visit to the region and demonstrated a strong knowledge about each member of the delegation.

He repeatedly described the progress in central Iraq as a "ceasefire" but urged patience by the United States. He summed up the tension among ethnic groups in Iraq more succinctly than I had ever heard. He said, "Sunnis fear the future, Shiites fear the past, and Kurds fear the past, present and future."

Sitting next to the prime minister over lunch, I asked what he thought about talk that American forces should begin withdrawing from Iraq 60 days into the next administration. He replied, without hesitation, "that would be a disaster for the Iraqi people and for the United States."



*Pence speaking with Kurdish Prime Minister Barzani over dinner*

The most poignant moment of our conversation was when I asked, "Where were you when Saddam attacked Halabja with chemical weapons?" He became reflective and spoke of having been a young man in the Kurdish military at the time. He said, "We heard only that something had happened at Halabja but we did not know what."

Kurdish officials estimate that tens of thousands of men, women and children were asphyxiated or have suffered lasting health problems as a result of on that day of horror in 1988.

The Kurdish people have endured much and prevailed. My visit to the north renews my confidence that, with justice and the rule of law, Iraq can and will prevail as well.

Our return trip to Baghdad aboard another C-130 went quickly and we were soon helicoptering our way to the Green Zone in the heart of the capital city.

As we overflew Baghdad, I was again struck by the sheer dimensions of this city of 6 million. Despite its immense population, Baghdad contains very few buildings taller than 10 stories. The streets below us were teeming with everyday life, foot traffic and cars. This weekend, Baghdad plays host to a soccer tournament. Despite the ravages of decades of repression and war, thanks to the sacrifices of American and Iraqi soldiers, this city is coming back.

Our first meeting in Baghdad was with the author of that comeback, General David Petraeus.



*Congressman Pence with General David Petraeus*

I first met General Petraeus during his initial tour here with the 101st Airborne. I last saw him when he testified about the progress of the military surge before Congress. My impression of Petraeus has always been the same- he is a soldier's soldier. Unpretentious and seemingly unimpressed with his vaunted position, General Petraeus always reflects a humble respect for civilian control of the military. His servant attitude comes across in a clear presentation of facts and absolute candor.

As we entered the briefing room in the coalition headquarters, General Petraeus greeted me warmly saying, "Welcome back to Baghdad!" Over the course of the next hour, he detailed the progress and challenges our troops are facing one year after the surge.

The message was clear: the surge is working but the battle is far from over. Violence is down significantly in the past year. The enemies' abilities have been degraded in both degree and type of attack. U.S. forces have made measurable progress against terrorist elements in both Baghdad and Al Anbar Province due to both the surge and expanded cooperation among the civilian population.

While the military surge is working, the Iraqi Parliament seems to have gone to work too. The adoption of a budget, the passage of a law permitting former Baath Party members to work for the government and the plan for provincial elections this fall represent exactly the kind of progress many in our diplomatic team had hoped to see.

Later that evening, we dined with Ambassador Ryan Crocker, at his personal residence. But Ambassador Crocker was also very clear on the need to see more significant political reforms, especially an agreement on sharing oil revenues.



*Congressman Pence at dinner with U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker*

As I sat next to Ambassador Crocker over dinner, I thought of the way that he and General Petraeus were of similar quality. Both are men of forceful intellect but gentle demeanor. Both men are deeply devoted to the cause of freedom but realistic about the limits of American power.

If our progress in Iraq continues, history may well attribute much of the credit to these talented and humble public servants. The General and the American Ambassador may be remembered as two men whose professionalism and diplomacy brought this nascent democracy back from the brink.

### **Day 2: From Camp Fallujah to the Streets of Haditha**

Another early morning began by boarding helicopters to Camp Fallujah for a briefing on the fight against terrorist violence in Al Anbar. Years ago, two separate battles in Fallujah and painful U.S. losses attested to the dominance of Al Qaeda and Sunni insurgents in western Iraq.



*Pence with Troops in Iraq*

Meeting with the senior American leadership in this sector, we were astonished to learn that the enemy has been virtually driven from this province. Effective military action, combined with strong cooperation by Sunni Arabs in the "Anbar Awakening," have turned this region from anarchy to success. And we were about to see it for ourselves.

After being briefed by commanders, we boarded a pair of Marine Corps Osprey aircraft for a high velocity trip to Haditha, a city of 100,000 in northern Anbar.



*Congressman Pence arrives via Osprey in Haditha*

Our helicopters touched down gently on an athletic field that had been the sight of horrific Al Qaeda violence.

Just one year ago on this very site, Al Qaeda beheaded several townspeople who had been cooperating with our military. Friends and neighbors were forced to watch from the stands.

Today the city is, as the Arab mayor of Haditha told me, "100 percent secure." The "Anbar Awakening" among Sunnis has given rise to a "sons of Iraq" movement. Now more than 90,000 young Iraqi men participate in supporting police and military efforts against terrorism. The change has been substantial, and I could see it on the faces of Iraqis at the outdoor market in Haditha.

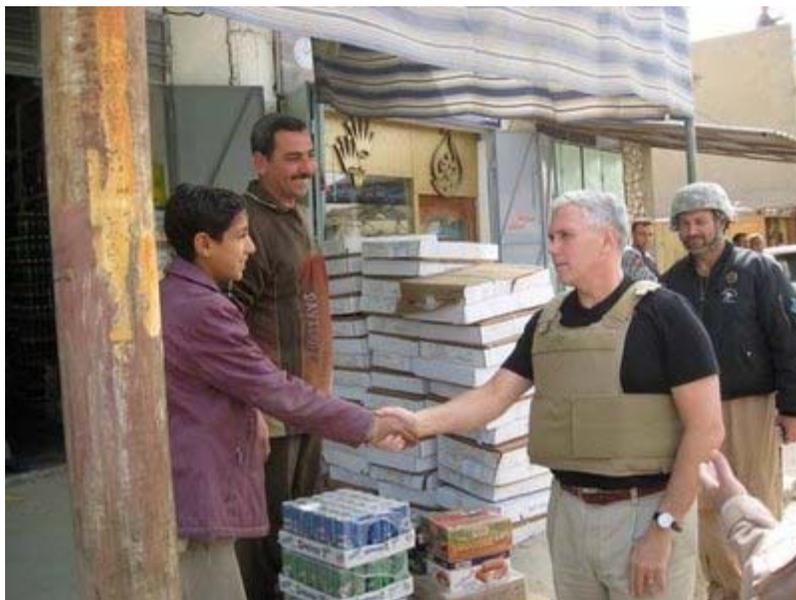


*Congressman Pence on the streets of Haditha*

After a warm greeting from local Iraqi officials and military personnel, we boarded a convoy of military vehicles and made our way to the downtown market street of Haditha. Despite a large contingent of military security, as we exited our convoy, hundreds of adults and children lined the street for a glimpse, a handshake or a hello. The people of Haditha greeted our group of officials and the soldiers with genuine warmth.

I never lost sight of the fact that we were in a war zone. After all, it is impossible to feel that you are in a fully safe environment when you are wearing a flak jacket and surrounded by security. But it was more important for me to find out what the Iraqi people were saying about the security situation in Al Anbar. What do the citizens who walk the streets each day think of the progress made? So, with an interpreter present, I asked one Iraqi after another, "What about the terrorists?" Time and again, the answer was the same, "The terrorists are gone." "The city is safe," I heard again and again. It was quite remarkable.

Often, after dismissing my concern about terrorism, they would tell me, "We need money for infrastructure." Many specifically referred to the need for road repair. While they understand the reality of violence, they are focused upon a future of peace, stability and growth.

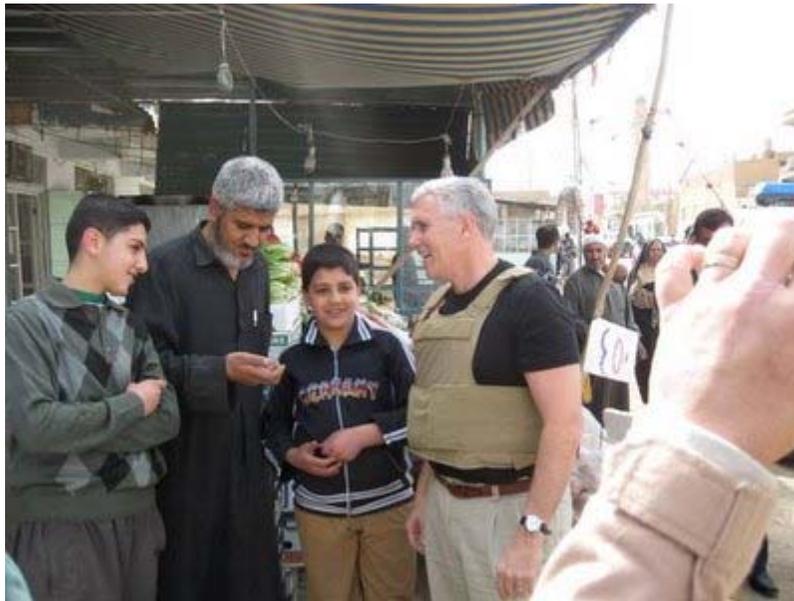


*Congressman Pence greets a young Iraqi on the streets of Haditha*

My favorite part of the market this time was the same as last year: the kids. In the midst of poverty and years of war and terror, these shining faces possess the timeless resilience of youth

I took to passing out tin coins with a picture of the U.S. Capitol on the back. The kids loved the coins. One little boy felt so indebted that he and his father insisted on giving me a handful of pistachio nuts from a bag he was holding in his hand. I kept two as a keepsake. Several of the children followed me down the street. Maybe out of curiosity, maybe looking for another coin, but they followed nonetheless.

Thanks to the American soldier, the Iraqi soldier and the support of thousands of ordinary Iraqis who have supported our efforts, Al Qaeda, terrorism and fear is being driven from Haditha.



*Congressman Pence talks to Iraqi's on the streets of Haditha*

As our aircraft lurched into the skies of Haditha, I thought of the sacrifices our soldiers and their families have made to bring us to this day. I thought of heroic Iraqis who died in the fight. And I thought of those boys of Haditha in whose shining eyes I saw a glimpse of a boundless future for the good people of Iraq.

If God permits, I will return to this place someday. The military escorts and armor will be gone, and I will walk this market again. I hope I will see a city fully healed from the ravages of tyranny and terror. And I hope I will see those boys again, especially the boy with the bag of pistachios.



*A young boy gives Congressman Pence a bag of pistachios to show his gratitude.*

### **Day Three: Kabul, Afghanistan**

After an extraordinary weekend in Iraq, we boarded our military jet and flew 2,000 miles to the other battlefield in the War on Terror: Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. In less than 24 hours, we met with local officials including President Hamid Karzai, visited the American base at Camp Phoenix and flew to Asadabad in the Kuna Province. The Kuna Province borders Pakistan in southeastern Afghanistan and has been the sight of some of the toughest fighting against the Taliban in recent days. It is also the site of some of the most hopeful progress in winning the hearts and minds of the Afghani people.

Our morning began in Kabul, Afghanistan, with a military briefing on the state of the conflict in Afghanistan. The terrorist groups, Taliban and Al Qaeda, have been attempting a comeback in Afghanistan and this spring could prove to be some of the toughest fighting in this country in some time. But our military will not be caught off guard. The majority of terrorist activity in Afghanistan is taking place in roughly ten percent of the country. Our military and our NATO allies are aware of this and are already focusing resources and tactics in these areas.

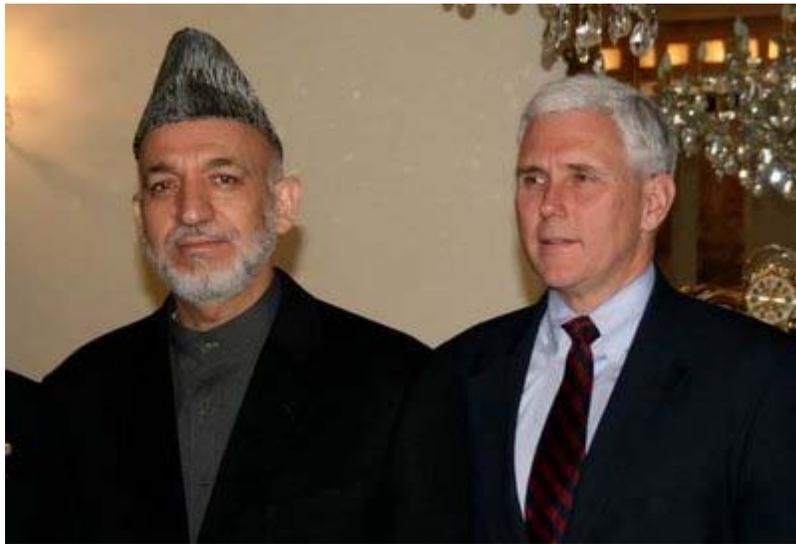
From our briefing, we were driven through Kabul to the presidential palace of President Hamid Karzai. I first met with President Karzai when I visited Afghanistan about three years ago.



*Congressional delegation with Afghani President Hamid Karzai (Congressman Pence is third from left)*

President Karzai is an approachable and well-spoken Muslim leader. We met in his personal office and the topics ranged from the battle against the Taliban to the drug trade. When it was my turn to speak, I told the president that I was pleased to be invited back to his office. I said, "I believe that God has protected and preserved you in this position 'for such a time as this' for the people of Afghanistan." He replied immediately with, "Yes, yes, this must be said, you are right to say it."

I suggested strongly that, with the possibility of a spring offensive by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, he might consider coming to America to update the American people on the progress of democratic Afghanistan. He assured me he would give the matter serious consideration. After a brief stop by a meeting of his Cabinet, we bade the president a fond farewell. May God continue to protect this good man and true friend of America.



*Congressman Pence with Afghani President Hamid Karzai*

### **Return To Camp Phoenix, Kabul, Afghanistan**

Several years ago, I visited thousands of Hoosier soldiers at Camp Phoenix in Kabul, so I thought I would return to encourage soldiers in 2008. Accompanied by several of my colleagues, we journeyed through the crowded streets of Kabul to this base where the Army

National Guard trains Afghani soldiers and police. We met with more than 100 soldiers from National Guard units from South Carolina and around the country. It was great to see that the work the Indiana Army National Guard began is being continued by such talented and enthusiastic men and women.



*Congressman Pence with soldiers at Camp Phoenix, Afghanistan*

#### **Asadabad, Afghanistan**

After our time with the soldiers, we boarded Blackhawk helicopters to fly through the mountains to one of the most dangerous areas of Afghanistan, the Kuna Province. Surrounded by towering mountains, this province borders Pakistan and has been a beehive of Taliban and Al Qaeda attacks in recent days.

Upon arriving in Asadabad, we made our way to a heavily armed convoy to see for ourselves how U.S. forces are winning the hearts and minds of the people of this region



*Congressman Pence in Asadabad, Afghanistan*

For centuries, a large percent of the local population has been closer to the people and influences of Pakistan due to the presence of a large river that can only be forded by rafts and

barges. The Provisional Reconstruction Team in Asadabad is bringing that isolation to an end. We are building a bridge.

Climbing into the armored vehicles of our waiting convey, we traveled a half hour north of this base camp to see the project for ourselves. Along the way, thousands of Afghani men, women and children lined the road waving and smiling as we passed. Judging from the warm reaction our large convoy got from the crowd, it's pretty obvious that the American soldier is a hero around here.

Arriving at the construction site, we hiked down to the river bed and saw dozens of Afghans splitting rocks and hauling stone to lay the foundation for the bridge. I spoke to the project manager, an Afghani, through an interpreter.



*Congressman Pence at a Provisional Reconstruction Team construction site in Afghanistan*

He spoke glowingly of the generosity of the American people and his enthusiasm for the region after the bridge is finished. The humorous part came when I asked at the end of our conversation, "Are you going to finish on time?" and he replied, before the interpreter translated, smiling and saying, "On time! Yes, on time!" Contractors are the same the world over.

As we drove back to the camp, again the people waved and cheered, especially the children. We are doing something very special in Afghanistan. These are tough people in a hard land but you can sense the hope in the air. You would be proud if you saw what I saw: proud of the American soldier, proud of our diplomats and proud of yourself for being a part of the kind of nation that can build bridges for people without hope. I am proud to serve you all.

#### **Day Four: Ramstein Air Force Base and Landstuhl Medical Center, Germany**

Before the day was over, we would fly thousands of miles to Germany where we would end our journey visiting soldiers at the Landstuhl Medical Center. Soldiers injured in Afghanistan and Iraq are brought to this facility, usually within 24 hours of their injuries. I can think of no more fitting end to our journey.

Happily, there were far fewer injured soldiers at Landstuhl than at any time I have visited. But I had a few encounters I will never forget.

The Bible says, "The Lord orders the steps of the righteous." Well, I don't know if I qualify, but He sure ordered my steps this morning! The first hospital room I entered, I said, "Where you from, son?" Kyle Lindsey replied, "Indiana, sir." I was taken aback.

Kyle is with the Air Force at Ramstein and hales from Corydon, Indiana. His dad, Steve, served in the Army but Kyle chose the Air Force. Kyle became ill during regular duty on the base and is expected to make a full recovery. It was such a privilege to feel like somebody made sure that Hoosier got to see a friendly Indiana face while he was feeling poorly.

Next I met a Marine named Travis McGrath who was recovering from serious injuries incurred in Fallujah on the very day we visited the camp. Travis was being prepped for the flight home but he still sat up bravely and accepted our attention and praise. This brave Marine from Vermont is going to take some time to heal physically, but from the light in his eyes you could see the enemy hadn't laid a finger on his heart.

Before leaving the base, we took time for a lunch with local troops. I was delighted to break bread with three Hoosiers in the Air Force, including two with ties to Indiana's 6th District. Captain Scott Thomas is from Fort Wayne and Bluffton. He and his family have been in the military for almost 20 years, and the confidence and the bars on this captain's collar proved that he is only getting started on a great American life. Staff Sgt. Scott Humphries is from Fountain City and is a constituent. Also, Air Force, Staff Sgt. Humphries is preparing to leave at the end of his tour next year.

Trained in the technical area of heating and cooling, this guy is going to be beating back job offers with a stick. Tech. Sgt. Charles Roberts is from Elkhart and provides leadership training for rising officers. After his tour of duty, he wants to come back to Indiana and teach. This quiet and confident man would be a credit to any school in the state. An hour for lunch, easy conversation, a few pictures and we were on our way back to Washington, D.C. What a joy it was to be with these four fine Hoosiers.

### **Closing Thoughts**

This year, with the deployment of the 76th Brigade of the Indiana Army National Guard, our state will have more soldiers in Iraq than any other state in the union. At the deployment ceremony in the RCA Dome, I told the 76th, "You and your families deserve to know you are entering a widening American success." From what I saw on the ground in Irbil, Baghdad, Fallujah and Haditha, I believe that now more than ever.

The Bible tells how King Solomon prayed for wisdom concluding, "for who is able to govern this great people of yours?" Having the opportunity serve in Congress is a great privilege but the opportunity to see what I saw this weekend is greater still. Seeing your generosity in action among the children of Haditha, Iraq, and Asadabad, Afghanistan, seeing the courage and determination of your sons and daughters who carry the lamp of freedom into this dark place giving hope to millions, I am more convinced than ever the people of America are, indeed, a great people. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you.



*Congressman Pence in the air over Afghanistan*

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