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4/24/07
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U.S. National Security Policy

Policymaker Interview: Michigan Congressman Mike Rogers

Given his experience as a company commander in the U.S. Army, his many trips to the Middle East and his membership on the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, I figured that Michigan Congressman Mike Rogers would be a terrific selection for my policymaker interview.

On Wednesday, April 14th, Congressman Rogers and I sat down to talk about a wide variety of national security issues in the Capitol Building. During the interview, the congressman was honest and insightful and provided numerous insights regarding the role of Congress vis-à-vis national security and his thoughts on the current conflict in Iraq.

Impact of the Federal Bureaucracy

In light of the absurdly complex Department of Defense organizational charts that we examined in class and Congressman Rogers' military experience, I was curious to find out just how the DOD's intricate organizational structure gets translated into on-the-ground action. When asked about this, the congressman replied that

"The bureaucracy does not impact the line soldier until it's a policy question or a logistics question to the point of 'are they getting what they need?' Sometimes the bureaucracy can slow that process, but in most cases the bureaucracy gets in the way when you are talking about what is the policy and what are the rules of engagement for a soldier---what are their mission assignments? In a very complicated conflict, a low intensity conflict, an unconventional conflict like we have in Iraq, it has added complications because that is very policy-driven all the way down to the line soldier, and that's how the bureaucracy can impact the line soldier."

The congressman's statement squares with our recent class discussion regarding the U.S. military's tremendous strength in traditional conflicts and the difficulties that can arise when our military is forced to engage in irregular and disruptive conflicts like the war in Iraq. Rogers spoke more about the difficulties that unconventional conflicts can create for the rules of engagement and the role that the bureaucracy has played in trying to resolve these difficulties. Specifically, he alluded to policy changes that were made following controversial shootings involving the U.S. military, presumably the contentious May 2006 shootings in Haditha:

"Through that bureaucracy... a message was sent because there were some bad shootings (in Iraq, this message was) to restrict the soldier's ability to freely engage the enemy. It does cause problems. It slows progress, it adds to morale difficulties for soldiers and quite frankly that confusion can often cost lives. Those rules of engagement at that level needed to be changed. The good news is they are going through some command structure

changes to try to fix those problems so that a soldier can engage the enemy and be aggressive about pursuing an enemy versus trying to ask questions before they shoot.”

This quote underscores the important impact that policy questions can have on the actions of the line soldier. Also, given the fierce debate regarding the Iraq war resolution and the difficulty that Congress has had in agreeing on the specific provisions of the FY07 emergency war supplemental, it is clear that the logistics question of “are they getting what they need?” is becoming increasingly relevant to this debate. Currently, it seems as if Congress wields a tremendous amount of power regarding the provision of resources in Iraq and the potential timeline for troop withdrawal. Only time will tell how this situation will resolve itself, but for now it is safe to say that the bureaucracy is having a profound impact on the way that the U.S. military is conducting its mission in Iraq.

Moving Forward in Iraq

Congressman Rogers voted against the Iraq war resolution in February on the grounds that it was a political document offering no workable alternative solutions to the current situation. During the intense floor debate on the legislation, Rogers introduced his own piece of legislation, one that he hoped would help alleviate the current problems in Iraq.

The congressman’s Iraq war bill calls for 4,000 reinforcements to be brought into the country to aid in the fight against al Qaeda in the Al Anbar Province near Baghdad. The legislation also specifies that the rampant sectarian violence in Iraq should be dealt with by members of the Iraqi military using support from U.S. forces. Finally, the bill contends that the Department of State and Department of Defense have not been effectively coordinating the reconstruction efforts in Iraq. As a remedy, Rogers suggests that one person in the country should bear the entire responsibility and authority for managing reconstruction funds. During our interview, the congressman spoke to this inter-agency conflict and the impact that it has had on the U.S. war effort:

“It’s the largest embassy in the world, in Baghdad, and likely to get bigger. They did not have a very clear decision maker—who is in charge on the ground in Baghdad? So you have State Department believing that they are (in charge) because we are not now in open combat in the country because, like I said before, it’s an unconventional warfare situation...You’ve also got military guys trying to make military decisions and sometimes they’ve conflicted. It’s not a very good process about who actually is in charge, and one of the reasons why I called for that clarification is because I’m a big believer (that) in those circumstances you have to have a person who is designated to make decisions. At this point, I would make it with the military because you have such military influence.”

Throughout the semester, we have often discussed the tenuous relationship that exists between the civilian and the military world, specifically between the Departments of State and Defense. Rogers’ statement serves to underscore the difficulties that can arise when two powerful entities like State and DOD strongly disagree on who should play the predominant role in an unconventional warfare situation, especially one that also involves the reconstruction of an entire country. In his opinion, these reconstruction responsibilities should lie within the Department of Defense because of the tremendous

military presence that still exists within the country. Similarly, in class we have discussed the need for the military to take the lead in reconstruction efforts due to the State Department's lack of a legitimate planning culture. While the State Department can discuss the need to implement regional government councils throughout Iraq, only the military has the actionable planning structure in place to physically deal with the complexities presented by reconstruction.

Impact of the House Select Committee on Intelligence on National Security Policy

When examining the intelligence community in class, we described the intelligence collection process as a pyramid in which inputs occur at the bottom and key information "bubbles up" to the top after a sustained vetting process. The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence is situated at the very top of this intelligence pyramid due to its role in presenting valuable knowledge for a select group of policymakers. In this particular case, this select group is comprised of members of Congress and their respective staffs. To that end, I asked Congressman Rogers about the committee's priorities and the scope of the information that it receives:

"When it comes to the intelligence side of it on the day-to-day operations, we get everything that is out there. (There are) only 21 of us that have access to that kind of information. An average member would not need to know some operational details, but because we have an oversight role we need to know some operational details. You can still do your job as a member of Congress without getting some of the information and to the degree that we get it on the Intelligence Committee. It's pretty sensitive stuff that goes through there, it's really important that we keep it to the smallest pool possible to prevent leaks."

As discussed in class, the issue of secrecy in the intelligence community is absolutely crucial. Indeed, the limited number of members (22) who have access to the Intelligence Committee's sensitive information reflects this institutional bias towards secrecy. Regardless of the fact that the committee deals with top-secret information, Rogers reiterated the fact that it must still fulfill its oversight role and determine how the legislative branch's policies are being implemented and by whom:

"The first responsibility we have on Intel is oversight, so we make sure that all of the 16 spy agencies are doing what they are supposed to do, spending the money the way they are supposed to spend it and they are (operating) within the Constitution and U.S. law. Secondly, we take the information that we get from a policy perspective and try to apply it to policy decisions that we make in Congress. It's big, the world is a big and active place as you might imagine; you have terrorist threats, strategic threats, long-term threats and short-term threats. Our job is to try to get through all of that information and apply that to policy decisions that we will make either through the committee or through different House votes or resolutions on the floor."

During our conversation about the Intel committee, I was surprised to learn that every member of Congress has a security clearance that allows them to get classified information as long as they are willing to sign the necessary confidentiality forms. Of course, it is up to the individual members of Congress to exercise this right and stay

informed on important issues of national security. Basically, every member has the capability to gather the information that is needed to make sound decisions on sensitive policy issues, regardless of whether or not they are actually a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence.

Interestingly enough, Rogers pointed out that while he was not a member of the committee during the lead-up to the Iraq war in early 2003, he still chose to do his own research on the situation and gather information independently as a concerned member of Congress. Learning that all 535 members of Congress can access classified information when necessary was reassuring to me: In my opinion, it eliminates the potential “knowledge gap” that is created by only having select closed committees discuss highly-relevant intelligence information. Whether or not every member actually chooses to exercise this right on a consistent basis is a different issue altogether.

U.S. National Security Policy: A Look Ahead

During his time as a member of Congress, Rogers has traveled extensively throughout the Middle East and has met with numerous Israeli and Palestinian leaders. He has made more than a dozen Middle East visits since 2001, traveling to Iraq, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, among others. Given the extensive amount of time that the congressman has spent in conflict areas where security policy is actually implemented, I asked him about the role (or lack thereof) that diplomacy should play in America’s contemporary national security policy:

“We need to be more aggressive. Diplomacy does not mean surrender, and at the same time diplomacy does not mean that you shouldn’t have an aggressive posture militarily where you need it. It’s important, I think, that we continue to engage Iran and Syria, not at a high level but at a level that promotes at least dialogue which to me is very important. It doesn’t mean we are cooperating with them, it doesn’t mean we should and it doesn’t mean we should capitulate on any of the things that we know are security-oriented. But it doesn’t mean we can’t talk to them. I came away from those trips thinking, ‘Hey we need to engage these countries more than we are, and we need to make sure that our military policies are consistent with what we want the outcome to be’. In other words, if you want to get rid of Osama bin Laden we better have a policy review to make sure that policy says you have all the rights and responsibilities to do just that. I’m not sure we’ve done that as clearly as we need to because it is such a big bureaucracy. State department is involved, DOD is involved and the National Security Council is involved. Certainly, what I’ve found is it’s really important that we as members of Congress who have access to all of that information and have no boss in any of those departments are able to focus it (where necessary).”

The congressman’s response regarding the high importance of diplomacy and fostering political dialogues was quite surprising to me given his extensive military background. I simply figured that Rogers would view diplomacy as a fairly powerless and unnecessary arrow in America’s quiver. If I had the opportunity to interview the congressman again today, I would be curious to get his opinion on House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s recent diplomatic trip to Syria and its appropriateness given her leadership position in the legislative branch.

Besides the diplomacy issue, I was also surprised by Congressman Rogers' contention that the military did not have a chance to effectively eliminate Osama bin Laden due to the overwhelming size of the federal bureaucracy and the lack of an adequate initial policy review. This provides further evidence that the sheer magnitude of the bureaucracy can have a tremendous impact on the actual implementation of national security policy and implies that a more comprehensive policy review may have led to a different outcome in our military's fruitless search for bin Laden.

All in all, my policymaker interview with Congressman Rogers was tremendously insightful and provided me with an invaluable understanding of the impact that Congress and the greater military bureaucracy can have on our country's national security policy. The interview also gave me a fantastic opportunity to better understand the nuances of the congressman's political views on the war in Iraq and provided me with a tremendous real-life example of civilian-military conflict. I definitely came away from my meeting with a deeper understanding of the vast security challenges that are created by today's uncertain threat environment and the important role that diplomacy may play in this environment in the near future.