

DOG N PONY

The nice thing about having two full days of Dog N Pony show is that you can keep it on in the background, like Muzak, and still feel like you participated. I've seen some—but not all—of today's testimony.

The weird thing about the Dog N Pony is the way the upcoming elections really challenge the message discipline of the Republicans. Susan Collins sounded almost sane. John Cornyn sounded like he's gonna get beat by Rick Noriega. And Joe Lieberman—safe from any upcoming challenge—sounded like the biggest Republican. John McCain even sounded stern and concerned and managed to avoid mentioning his 100 year plan. Republicans and Democrats alike rightly asked why, with \$105/barrel oil, we're still funding Iraq's redevelopment—a question Petraeus and Crocker were unable to answer satisfactorily.

Kudos to Hillary for promoting herself to honorary co-Chair in order to give (as Thomas Ricks dubs it) the third opening statement of the hearing; presumably Obama will do the same this afternoon.

The other thing about these hearings (and the Iraq war generally) is you never know who will really shine. I liked Claire McCaskill's line of questioning (she was incredulous when Petraeus declared Maliki the victor in his recent debacle in Basra), but I would have liked to see her press Petraeus some more. My prize for the best questioner—at least for the morning—is a tie going to Evan Bayh (whom I saw) and Jim Webb (whom I missed, but whose questioning Spencer Ackerman captured nicely). Both pointed out that Petraeus' take on the overall value of staying in Iraq really didn't account for our commitments elsewhere, most importantly on the border of Paksitan, where the guys who hit us on 9/11 still run free. Here's Spencer's description of Webb's question:

Webb's concerned about overstretch and

the strain of the war's required deployments on military readiness. He was incredulous: there'll be 10,000 more troops in Iraq *after* the surge than there were there before? Quickly he moved to the wages of decreased readiness, noting that Al Qaeda continues to rebuild itself in Pakistan, implying that we won't be able to meet needed challenges there. "The concern I have with keeping that level force in Iraq, looking at these other situations, particularly Afghanistan... I'm curious at the level of agreement in [your] plan [comes from] the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?"

Petraeus didn't want to *touch* that. All he said was that Admiral Fallon, the former head of Central Command, and Admiral Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were "fully informed." Webb and Petraeus gave each other what looked to me like thousand-yard stares. Webb promised that next week he'd ask Mullen that question.

Other than that, I'd like to highly recommend the liveblog of Thomas Ricks, my favorite "real" journalist to pick up the art of liveblogging. Ricks caught the thick tension between Joementum and the Democrats:

I don't know if it is visible on television, but it looked liked there was a lot of teeth-gritting going on just now among the five Democrats sitting on the left side of the hearings as their erstwhile colleague (and vice presidential nominee)—Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.) —lectured them on how much better the war in Iraq is going. Why wouldn't they just be "honest," he asked?

[snip]

I'm not a political reporter, but I had to think that part of [Hillary's statement on the irresponsibility of not considering withdrawal] was aimed at Sen. Joe Lieberman. Didn't the Clintons help him in his recent re-election effort? I forget.

I suspect Sen. Clinton just hates being called irresponsible. If she got elected president, that might replace "inappropriate" as Washington's favorite word.

And he has what (thus far, though it's still early) the most astute observation of the day:

Also, where does a senator from Mississippi [Roger Wicker] get off invoking President Lincoln's perseverance in the Civil War?

I guess Wicker isn't as deftly thinking of his November election as Susan Collins.