

FOR WHAT?

As my favorite professional journalist turned DFH blogger noted, today's hearings are descending into restatements of questions already asked yesterday. One notable exception, though, was Robert Wexler. I'm not usually a fan of Wexler's emotional displays. But Wexler boiled down the question everyone is and has been asking.

General Petraeus, last week in anticipation of this hearing, I sent an urgent email asking my constituents and other Americans if they were serving on this committee, what is the one question they would pose to you. There was an extraordinary response, with more than 5000 questions submitted. These emails and phone calls expressed deeply held frustrations about the War in Iraq and reflect the feelings of millions of Americans who feel that their opinions and concerns are cast aside by the Bush Administration. I want to thank everyone who responded and submitted a question for today's hearing. While many of the respondents rightfully highlighted the bravery of our troops, a majority of the emails expressed a strong desire to see a withdrawal of American soldiers from Iraq and an end to this five-year war that has cost our nation so dearly.

Most of the questions boiled down to this: General, we often see President Bush and Senator McCain say we must win in Iraq. What is the definition of winning? What would a military victory look like that was sufficient enough to allow us to begin leaving?

Then, in a horrific turn of events, two of my constituents, Esther and Len Wolfer of Boca Raton, Florida, learned that this past Sunday their son had been

killed for this war. Major Stuart Wolfer was a 36-year old Reservist on his second tour. He was married with three young children, ages 5, 3, and 20 months. His family was relieved that he was in the Green Zone, for they hoped he would be safe there. He was not. I spoke to Mr. Wolfer yesterday—last night—who asked me to ask you simply, "For what? For what had he lost his son?"

So allow me to combine if you will the questions of the people that responded to me and Mr. Wolfer. What has all this been for. And please, respectfully, don't tell us as you told Senator Warner yesterday, "to remove a brutal dictator." That's not good enough. There are many dictators in the world. For what did Stuart Wolfer and the other 4024 sons and daughters die for? And how will we define victory so we can bring this never-ending war to a close?

And if I will, when Mr. Burton asks for a definition of what is failure, we get a litany of items. But when Mr. Ackerman asks, "what's the definition of victory," we get little. Please tell us General, what is winning?

It's the question Cindy Sheehan started asking four years ago yesterday, when her own son Casey died. Why did Casey Sheehan and why did Stuart Wolfer have to die? I suspect Petraeus' rather cold discussion of national interest won't satisfy that question—but it's still more of an answer than George Bush has ever given.

Update: By popular request, here's the transcript of Petraeus' answer:

General Petraeus: First of all, Congress, let me tell you that what we are fighting for is national interest.

It is interest that as I stated have to do with Al Qaeda, a sworn enemy of the

United States and the free world, has to do with the possible spread of sectarian conflict in Iraq, conflict that had engulfed that country and had it on the brink of Civil War.

It has to do with regional stability, a region that is of critical importance to the global economy, and it has to do with certainly the influence of Iran, another obviously very important element, in that region.

In terms of what it is that we are trying to achieve, I think simply it is a country that is at peace with itself and its neighbors, it is a country that can defend itself, that has a government that is reasonably representative and broadly responsive to its citizens, and a country that is involved in and engaged in, again the global economy.

Ambassador Crocker and I, for what it's worth, have typically seen ourselves as minimalists, we're not after the Holy Grail in Iraq and we're not after Jeffersonian Democracy.

We're after conditions that would allow our soldiers to disengage, and that is in fact what we are doing. As we achieve progress, as we have with the Surge, and that is what is indeed allowing us to withdraw the Surge forces, again well over one quarter of our ground combat power five of 20 brigade combat teams plus two marine battalions and the marine expeditionary unit by the end of July.

Congressman Wexler: Thank you.