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Soldiering On

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Jack Reed opposed the war in Iraq. But the former paratrooper has been there 12 times—most recently with Senate colleague Barack Obama—and he's a key to what the Democrats will do to end it.

General John Abizaid sat beside an armored vehicle on the airstrip in Mosul, Iraq. After a marathon schedule of briefings on Easter weekend three years ago, the commander of US forces was explaining why he was optimistic that the United States could succeed in Iraq.

The first democratic elections in Iraq's history had quieted the insurgency, reducing the roadside bombings and civil strife. The relative calm had given rise in many cities to stirrings of commerce, local politics, and even cooperation with the Americans. To Abizaid, an Arabic speaker with experience in the region, there was evidence that Iraq's religious and ethnic groups did not want civil war.

Mingling nearby with soldiers from a Rhode Island National Guard brigade was Senator Jack Reed, who had known Abizaid since their days as officers in the 82nd Airborne Division toward the end of the Vietnam War. After three days in Abizaid's entourage, Reed had absorbed the same stream of intelligence from US and Iraqi brass, from officers and noncoms, from diplomats and contractors. He agreed with most of the general's observations,

but he saw the situation through a different lens: "We could still blow it."

Reed's judgment was informed by his first career as a West Point-educated Army officer and the ties he has maintained to people high in the military. His analysis was leavened with the skepticism bred by his second career, as a Harvard-trained lawyer. It was influenced, too, by his third career, as a politician—one who opposed the war in Iraq from the start.

From his first days in the Senate almost 12 years ago, party elders have turned to Reed for military counsel. Since the September 11 attacks, his influence has increased to the point that he is a leader of the Senate Democrats' informal war council and a key craftsman of Democratic policy on Iraq.

So when Barack Obama spoke to reporters on a hilltop overlooking Amman, Jordan, last month following his tour of Afghanistan and Iraq, it was natural that the man at his right hand was Jack Reed. Reed, leader of the congressional delegation that included Obama, was the first to speak.

"In Iraq we have witnessed a tangible reduction in violence," Reed said, referring to the measured success of the 2007 "surge" of 30,000 extra combat troops into Iraq—a move that Reed, like Obama and most other Democrats, had opposed. Unlike Obama, Reed had acknowledged as early as last summer that the surge was achieving military gains.

Then Reed rattled off a summary of the Democratic war policy he helped

write: “These impressive tactical and operational successes must be linked to a strategy that allows us to decrease our forces in Iraq while continuing ongoing counterterrorism and training missions in Iraq and particularly ensuring robust protection of our forces.”

Reed noted that “Iraq’s political leaders are also urging tangible timelines to accomplish this mission,” alluding to Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki’s suggestion that Obama’s 16-month timetable for pulling US combat troops out of Iraq was compatible with the desires of Iraqi leaders. Reed did not mention that he has long resisted hard deadlines for troop withdrawal in deference to the flexibility he believes General David Petraeus and other US commanders need.

A self-deprecating son of blue-collar parents, Reed said that he was only “the concierge” on the tour of war zones that most observers say bolstered Obama’s foreign-policy and national-security credentials.

But insiders know that Reed, who had made 11 previous trips to Iraq, contributed not only to the hurried preparations for the trip but also to the long-term formulation of a Democratic policy suited to Obama’s argument that Afghanistan—not Iraq—should be the focus of US counterterrorism efforts.

The trip clarified Reed’s status as a leading Democrat who can speak to both sides of this country’s deepest political division since the Vietnam War. He has one foot in the camp that voted against the use of force in Iraq and criticizes the Bush administration’s conduct of the war. But he also has a foot in the camp that thinks a decent ending might yet be salvaged, especially in the wake of the Bush-Petraeus surge and signs of increased military and

political skill on the part of the al-Maliki-led government.

“We are in it,” Reed said of the Iraq war this past spring. “We have to maximize our ability to come away with some kind of acceptable outcome.”

The Iraq-Afghanistan trip further fueled talk of Reed as a possible ticketmate or Cabinet pick for Obama—speculation that the Rhode Islander dismisses. Reed likely would be an influential Senate voice in an Obama administration, and he would get a respectful hearing from a President John McCain, too. The Republican senator from Arizona, a conspicuous advocate of the surge in Iraq, said of his longtime colleague on the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2005: “Jack travels to Iraq, he has friends in Iraq, and because of his many connections, Jack sees things in Iraq that a lot of us don’t get to see.”

Reed is a partisan Democrat by most measures and one of the Senate’s most liberal members. He was one of 22 Senate Democrats who voted in 2002 against the use of force in Iraq, but he stood out as the one who viewed the American engagement through a soldier’s eyes. He has tempered his party’s antiwar policy, opposing any shutoff of war funds and generally resisting deadlines for the withdrawal of US troops. He has kept his distance from the judgment that the war is a lost cause built on lies about the threat from Saddam.

“Jack is not the sort of politician that draws a lot of attention to himself,” says Secretary of the Army Pete Geren, a Texas Democrat who served with Reed in the House. “But when Jack talks on military issues, people on both sides of the aisle want to know what he has to say.”

A day with Reed in his hometown of Cranston, Rhode Island, reveals something of his upbringing as the son of a public-school custodian and a factory worker.

On a sunny Sunday, Reed joined the state's politicians to observe Israel's 60th birthday. They were at the Temple to Music in a magnificent park designed by Frederick Law Olmstead. Beyond the park's gate is a broad avenue of auto-parts shops, converted mills, triple-decker homes, and churchfronts with signs in Vietnamese and Spanish. The park is near the factory where Reed's parents met before World War II, the small Cape Cod-style house he grew up in, and the parish school he attended.

The family spent summers at a little cottage near Scarborough Beach, less than 30 miles to the south. Many of the neighbors camped in Army-surplus tents.

Reed set his sights on military service before he went to LaSalle Academy, a Christian Brothers school in nearby Providence, where he played varsity football. The 20/20 vision requirement scuttled an early dream of Annapolis, so he went to West Point.

"If you count marching to chapel on Sundays," Reed once said, he's been working seven-day weeks since his plebe summer—one year before the Tet offensive. US forces left Vietnam before many members of his class of 1971 got orders to fight there. Second Lieutenant Reed, graduating 16th in his class, got orders to study at Harvard. After earning a master's degree at the Kennedy School of Government, he joined the 82nd Airborne Division. Reed, who might reach five-foot-seven on a tall day, laughs as he recalls the challenge of being one of the shortest officers at Fort Bragg.

Reed became commander of his paratroop company, taught for a time at West Point, and in 1979, after 12 years in the Army, resigned from active duty as a captain and returned to Harvard to study law. After a year with a Washington firm, he went home to Rhode Island, joined a Providence firm, and soon began a string of winning election campaigns.

Reed's three terms in the state senate foreshadowed what was to come. He became known for getting results, if not headlines, through preparation, persistence, and civil dealings with adversaries.

In 1990 Reed mortgaged his house and bet most of his life savings on a race for an open congressional seat. The contest was the toughest of his eight campaigns, and Reed showed a willingness to launch tough attacks if that's what it took to win.

Trudy Coxe, a well-known environmentalist, was the kind of liberal Republican that Rhode Island has often elected. Reed—by now a lawyer with two Harvard degrees—waged a brand of class warfare that could still heat up a crowd. He blasted Coxe over oil stocks in the "million-dollar portfolio" she had inherited from her parents. The race played as a caricature battle of New England stereotypes: scrappy Irish street pol versus scion of the Yankee ruling class. The competitive race cracked open in its last weeks, and Reed won going away.

In the House of Representatives, he was a solid liberal and very popular at home.

In 1996, Reed thumped another moderate Republican to win the Senate seat opened by Democrat Claiborne Pell's retirement. Days after his swearing-in, he began what has become

a close partnership with Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, senior Democrat on the Armed Services Committee. On a tour of the Balkans, he impressed Levin and others with the breadth of his military contacts in NATO and the depth of his report on the trip.

He volunteered for political chores and won a plum seat on the Appropriations Committee in 2001 plus a waiver of the rules to let him stay on Armed Services.

“A lot of senators will kind of gloss over the details,” Levin says, recalling his argument for keeping Reed on the Armed Services panel. “He is one of those senators who reads, who studies, who gets into the working of the resolutions and the amendments. Jack knows the stakes are so damn high, having been in the military.”

Soon after the fall of Baghdad in the spring of 2003, Reed began keeping tabs. On tours of Iraq, he usually traveled with just an aide and a military escort; he ventured to outposts far from the Green Zone briefings; he waited in the chow line with the grunts. He and his staff kept track of e-mails from soldiers and Marines in Iraq and their families at home, which is how he learned about family members sending expensive care packages of Kevlar to poorly armored soldiers.

Reed was among the first to sound the alarm about the lack of armor for soldiers. “You had folks inside the Army itself who agreed with him and appreciated the leadership he showed on pushing the Pentagon to address the shortages,” says Army secretary Geren.

Among members of the Armed Services Committee, perhaps only McCain, a onetime prisoner of war in Hanoi, has had a greater capacity to

command the attention of his colleagues on the topic of prisoner abuse in Iraq.

Reed is known for his even temper, but on the issue of the abuse of prisoners, his low-key demeanor has given way more than once to cold fury. During Armed Services Committee testimony by deputy Defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz in May 2004, Reed demanded, “Mr. Secretary, do you think crouching naked for 45 minutes is humane?”

wolfowitz: “Not naked, absolutely not.”

reed: “Sensory deprivation, which would be a bag over your head for 72 hours. Do you think that’s humane?”

wolfowitz: “Let me come back to what you said, the work of this government—”

reed: “No, no. Answer the question, Mr. Secretary. Is that humane?”

wolfowitz: “I don’t know whether it means a bag over your head for 72 hours, Senator.”

reed: “Mr. Secretary, you’re dissembling, nonresponsive. Anybody would say putting a bag over someone’s head for 72 hours—”

Wolfowitz gave in: “I believe it’s not humane.”

During his 2005 tour of Iraq with Abizaid, Reed depicted the US mission there as a rickety tripod with a sturdy military leg but political and economic legs too stunted to stand. The Bush administration had yet to make the investment in public works and civic institutions needed to stabilize the new government and to starve the insurgency of support, he said.

Shortly before Thanksgiving 2005, with violence rising, Reed and Levin drafted the first version of their bill to push the President toward a

change of course. Reed and Levin resisted their party's demands for what Levin called "precipitous" action. The measure has never come close to passage, but it has evolved into the leading Democratic policy initiative on Iraq and a building block in Obama's position on the war.

Drawing on General David Petraeus's work to build up Iraqi security forces, their bill suggested a narrower mission based on training and support. From an antiwar standpoint, the Levin-Reed language seemed too mild. But Senate Republicans sensed its political danger. They attacked the resolution: "Jack Reed is not a cut-and-run guy, but this is a cut-and-run resolution," said Senator John Cornyn of Texas. Then they co-opted it: John Warner of Virginia, chair of the Armed Services Committee at the time and a former Navy secretary and veteran of two wars, marshaled a big Senate majority for a weaker version of the Levin-Reed mission change.

Even as he attacked some officials at the Pentagon, Reed teamed up with Chuck Hagel on legislation to expand the Army by 50,000 troops. The bill died in part because it clashed with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's desire for a lighter, more mobile force. But after Democrats swept the 2006 elections, Bush replaced Rumsfeld with Robert Gates, a practical-minded product of George H.W. Bush's brain trust and a Reed acquaintance from policy retreats at the Aspen Institute. Two months later, Bush called without fanfare for an expansion of the Army and Marine Corps. Congress adopted that budget request.

With the pragmatic Gates now in charge at the Pentagon, Petraeus assumed command in Iraq. Early in

2007, Bush took his advice to "surge" 25,000 more troops into Iraq—for a total of about 160,000—and to link US troops more tightly with Iraqi units. Reed joined Democratic opposition to the policy—it was likely to be "too little and too late," he said. That summer, Reed and Levin dropped their longtime opposition to troop-withdrawal deadlines. They proposed a May 2008 deadline that would have halted the surge. The measure failed.

The subsequent success of the surge has left Reed—like Obama and other Democrats who wanted to block it—in an awkward position. After postsurge visits to Iraq in summer 2007, last January, and in July with Obama, Reed has described successively stronger evidence that the surge has worked, at least on a tactical military level.

But Reed does not concede that it was a mistake to try to roll back the surge. He argues that a strong Senate vote for a pullout sent a good signal to Iraq's government. Because his measure stood no chance of becoming law over a Bush veto, he said, it could not limit the flexibility of US commanders in any practical way.

While Reed acknowledges that al-Maliki is making progress as a political and military leader, he cautions that the surge has yet to attain its larger purpose—giving Iraqi leaders the breathing room necessary for achieving political reconciliation through oil-revenue sharing, provincial elections, and other civic works.

Supporters of the surge reject that rationale. Frederick Kagan, a conservative scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, observes that the US Congress, not threatened by suicide bombers or riven by religious grievances that date back centuries, can hardly pass

an annual budget, let alone take the difficult actions needed, say, to put Social Security on a sustainable footing. Yet the same politicians expect their Iraqi counterparts to achieve a far more difficult agenda in a matter of months.

Reed remains troubled about Iraqi politics and what he views as the thinness of State Department and other US civilian investment in the counterinsurgency. But unlike some antiwar Democrats, he remains unwilling to rule out the possibility that America might need to keep tens of thousands of troops in Iraq for years to come.

Until the past couple of years, Reed had a movie habit. He often caught a late show with his then chief of staff, J.B. Poersch, at the multiplex near Reed's home in Crystal City. Reed could hold his own in a discussion of directors through film history, from Sergei Eisenstein to Robert Altman.

He has also clung to some of the fitness routines developed in high school and at West Point. Time was when Reed's Rangers—a squad of staffers led by a diminutive senator—could be seen jogging Thursday mornings on the Mall.

Reed once joked that, being Irish, he saw nothing strange about taking bachelorhood into his forties. But love changed all that. He was 52 when he met his bride-to-be on an official visit to Afghanistan. Julia Hart was a career member of the Senate professional staff in charge of organizing such trips. They met again months later in Rhode Island, where Hart was visiting a stepbrother, and the relationship blossomed. When they announced their engagement during an interview with a reporter in 2004, Hart, then 39, proved nimble, good humored, and politic. Asked her political affiliation, she said she was Catholic.

The couple wed at West Point in spring 2005 and enjoyed watching movies, hiking, and cooking together in the kitchens of their homes in Jamestown, Rhode Island, and Alexandria—until the arrival of baby Emily Hart Reed in 2006 disrupted those routines.

These days, family togetherness begins early, with Julia Reed back on the job in the Senate and Emily in daycare there. Her parents have introduced her to the wonders of the National Arboretum, and they still share cooking duties. But the big screen has largely given way to videos at home—and not everyone stays awake through the show.

Digital photos of little Emily were Exhibit A of Reed's avid transition to fatherhood one balmy spring night at a West Point gathering near the White House. At a dinner to promote the academy's new oral-history project, Reed flashed BlackBerry shots of the toddler. He talked with a classmate, Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, dean of the West Point Academic Board, about Obama's potential running mates—with never a murmur about himself. And when an alumni glee club sang the academy's alma mater, he stood at attention with his comrades of the Long Gray Line for the invocation of "The Corps, and the Corps, and the Corps."

Then Reed made a retreat. His wife and daughter were waiting at home.