

The Plight of the Antiwar Democrat

By Jay Newton-Small

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(New Castle, PA) - "Can't we please stop the war?" Eugene Gabriel implored Congressman Jason Altmire, shouting over a singer belting out Beyonce's Listen at the annual New Castle fireworks festival in western Pennsylvania. "That's what I wrote on my donation envelopes to you, both times, \$200 a pop."

The freshman Democrat leaned into Gabriel's ear to make sure his response was heard: "We tried, but [President George W.] Bush vetoed it." The Democratic strategy, Altmire explained, was to keep the pressure up by continuing to schedule votes on Iraq and hope "that more Republicans will go to the White House and say, 'We can't do this anymore.'" The reply didn't quite mollify Gabriel, 49, a financial adviser who calls himself pro-life, pro-gun but antiwar. His son Michael, 22, is in the National Guard in neighboring Ohio; half of his division is expected to be deployed to Iraq in 2008.

Two hundred feet and 20 minutes later, having weaved his way farther into the crowd, Altmire faced another question about "the mess in Iraq," this time from William Proch, 71, a retired steelworker. But when Altmire again mentioned Bush's veto, Proch grew angry, accusing Altmire of being "in lockstep with [Speaker of the House Nancy] Pelosi, putting our troops in danger." The lifelong Republican voted for Altmire in 2006 after GOP ethics scandals left him wanting a fresh face. But because he also wants more troops in Iraq, not fewer, Proch is feeling buyer's remorse.

This is the Democratic Iraq Dilemma. Altmire, like many of the other 30 newly elected Democratic freshmen, must serve two masters if he hopes to win re-election in his narrowly divided district--the Democrats who elected him in the hopes of ending the war and voters like Proch who still largely support the military effort in Iraq and are turned off by Democratic attempts to force Bush's hand.

It was against that backdrop that Pelosi announced her plan to hold a series of votes on Iraq this month--one each week throughout July. The Democrats' strategy of slowly winning over GOP votes to their side has already shown some success, as witnessed by recent efforts by Republican Senators John Warner and Richard Lugar to hasten the White House's timeline. Democratic leaders are also counting on the fact that public opinion continues to turn against the war. "This issue is a much more challenging problem on the Republican side," says Chris Van Hollen, head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, who is tasked with making sure those freshman Democrats hold onto their seats in November 2008. "There's a consensus that people want to change direction on Iraq."

In general, the numbers seem to support Van Hollen's assertion: 62% of Americans, including 84% of Democrats and 66% of independents, now believe it was a mistake to send troops to Iraq in the first place, according to a June 2007 Gallup poll. But among Republicans, the number, while growing, is much smaller; only 28% believe the Iraq war was a mistake, while, according to a June Pew poll, 58% say the military effort is going well. That makes for some uncomfortable conversations back home for Democratic Representatives like Altmire.

"All you do is fight and don't get anything done," Proch told Altmire, slapping his jeans-clad knee with a rolled-up program. Proch said he's frustrated that Democrats are trying to dictate timelines to Bush, whom he trusts more to handle the war. When I asked Altmire about Proch's criticism in an interview, he grew visibly frustrated. "I don't know how to respond to that because we're doing the best we can to address the issue that he's concerned about," Altmire said. "And we're getting no help from the Republicans, and we're certainly getting no help from the President. How's that our fault?"

Altmire's district stretches west from the Pittsburgh suburbs to the Ohio border. In 2006 he wrested the congressional seat from three-term incumbent Melissa Hart with just 52% of the vote. The district should vote solidly Republican; on the same ballot, former Steelers football star Lynn Swann, the Republican challenger to Governor Ed Rendell, won by more than 20 percentage points. But the time was right for Altmire, a pro-gun fiscal conservative whose sandy hair, hazel eyes and freckles make him look far younger than his 39 years.

The narrow win--by just 9,798 votes--has made Altmire a top target of Republicans. Swann briefly flirted with the idea of challenging Altmire but announced last week he would not, opening the door for a rematch with Hart, who told local papers this month she plans to run again.

Altmire welcomes the rematch. "I can't imagine people wanting to go back to more of the same," he told supporters in front of the Ambridge Pic 'n Save supermarket, flashing his boyish smile. Altmire is betting that the votes on Iraq will not only bring around Republican lawmakers but also turn the tide of public opinion on the war as a whole. When General David Petraeus' plan to add more than 30,000 troops to stabilize Iraq was announced in January, Altmire's office was fielding calls split down the center for and against the so-called surge.

"We noticed that over time they got more and more against the surge, and now they're coming in 4 or 5 to 1 against," Altmire said. In the two days I was on the road with the Congressman, only two people out of the dozens who chatted with Altmire expressed outright opposition to the Democratic timelines, though many were troubled by their implications. Arlene Carr, 66, a homemaker in New Castle, said she worries about increased terrorism at home if the U.S. fails in Iraq. And Skip Haswell, 62, a retired cop in Ambridge, said he's concerned that the troops will suffer from a Vietnam-type stigma if they come home unsuccessful. "I try to explain it to them, that this is a strategy for success. This isn't just pulling out and saying, 'We're leaving the rest for you,'" Altmire said. "Redeveloping the troops to fight terror--that's what this is all about. Nobody is saying, 'Pull out precipitously.'"

Yet that is precisely the charge Republicans are leveling in the hope of regaining Congress. As Robert A. Gleason Jr., chairman of the Pennsylvania Republican Party, puts it, "We're not quitters, and we're not going to withdraw." Democrats like Altmire, he warns, "better be very careful because they might get what they wish for. I don't think Americans or anyone would support a policy of defeat."

For now, Altmire is in a kind of political no-man's-land. At a local event shortly after he voted for a timeline to withdraw troops from Iraq, he was confronted by a constituent who was angry that Democrats hadn't put more pressure on Bush. "He asked why he'd bothered to vote for me, since I was clearly another rubber stamp for Bush," the Congressman recalls. Not three feet away, a woman who opposed the timeline jumped into the conversation. She argued that he was just a rubber stamp for Pelosi. "The crowd laughed when they heard her say that," he says, chuckling. "What am I? A rubber stamp for Bush or Pelosi?"