

International Herald Tribune: Mahoney of Florida, a moderate Democrat, calls for change on Iraq

By David M. Herszenhorn

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WEST PALM BEACH, Florida: If the White House retains any hope of persuading moderate Democrats to support the president's strategy in Iraq, Representative Tim Mahoney of Florida would seem to be a top prospect. A fiscal conservative from a mostly Republican district, Mahoney visited Iraq in July and acknowledged seeing military progress.

Allies of the Bush administration are paying for television ads that are running in Mahoney's district, including one featuring the tearful mother of a marine killed in the war saying: "We are starting to see results. The price is being paid. Don't give up." But Mahoney says that he and his constituents have made up their minds and that it is time for Congress to force a change.

"There is consensus that it's time to do something different," said Mahoney, who won the seat vacated by Representative Mark Foley, who resigned last year after disclosures that he had sent sexually explicit e-mail messages to underage House pages. "America has made a decision that it wants to move out."

Mahoney added: "Republicans are probably more vocal in my district than Democrats. Those ads are driven to Republicans - that's who they are trying to appeal to because they have lost Republican support for this war."

As lawmakers return to Washington with Democrats set to hold a marathon series of hearings on the war, Mahoney and other moderates are trying to find a balance between criticizing the Bush administration and supporting the troops, between helping the Democratic leadership keep pressure on the White House over the war and addressing constituents' demands on issues closer to home.

if ((!document.images && navigator.userAgent.indexOf("Mozilla/2.") >= 0)|| navigator.userAgent.indexOf("WebTV") >= 0){ document.write(""); }So far, only one Democrat, Representative Brian Baird of Washington, reversed his position over the August recess to support the president's strategy. The switch, made after he returned from a trip to Iraq last month, infuriated many of his constituents; several hundred spent four hours castigating him at a public forum. His switch also prompted attack ads against him by MoveOn.org, a group that opposes the war.

Mahoney said the lack of political or economic progress in Iraq had hardened his view that a new strategy is needed.

In talking to constituents about Iraq during lawmakers' August break, Mahoney emphasized his outrage over the financial cost of the war, hoping that the same message of fiscal conservatism that helped elect him would again resonate with voters and help establish his reputation as a centrist Democrat in a district where President George W. Bush won with more than half the vote in 2000 and in 2004.

"You have got to understand, for the last seven years all the money has been going to Iraq, all the money has been going to homeland security," Mahoney said Wednesday at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon in the Village of

Wellington, Florida.

"The president has been trying to keep it off the balance sheets so you don't know how bad it is. I'm here to tell you it's bad."

In Wellington, which is best known for its polo grounds and equestrian centers, Mahoney did not get a single question about the war, which he attributed to his constituents' having made up their minds and being satisfied with where he stands.

Carmen Priore, a member of the Wellington Village Council who attended the lunch, had a different explanation. "A lot of people sitting here in the chamber, they are concerned about how am I going to make a mortgage payment," Priore said. "Iraq seems so distant."

The rising demands to address domestic issues are an added burden as Mahoney and other moderates struggle to reconcile the conflicting facts on the ground in Iraq. They are also navigating the political peril of being attacked by liberal groups insisting on immediate withdrawal and being mischaracterized by White House allies seeking to transform any praise of American troops into support for the president's policies.

After his visit to Iraq in July, Mahoney was quickly quoted in a Republican press release as saying the escalation of troops in Iraq "has really made a difference and really has gotten Al Qaeda on their heels." The quote was taken from a local Florida newspaper article in which Mahoney also said, "There is going to have to be a different strategy."

Still, a month later, Mahoney said he felt a need to explain, a reflection of the pressure he faces as a freshman lawmaker in a district that Republicans are gunning to win back in 2008. "To a large extent, the progress I talked about was taken out of context," he said.

Then, Mahoney, whose focus when he ran for office was on domestic rather than foreign affairs, started in on a detailed analysis of recent developments in Iraq, including what he described as limited military progress.

"Militarily things have improved," Mahoney said. "But everybody I talked to at the beginning of the surge back in February all said the same thing, 'This is a three-legged stool.' There has got to be economic progress. We haven't seen it. There has got to be political progress - nonexistent."

Mahoney added: "We put the \$100 billion in, and two legs of this stool are broken, the two things that the army can't solve." The bottom line, Mahoney said, is that he is going back to Washington hoping Congress will force the president's hand. "Congress has to send a message," he said. "And that message is we're going to stop funding it."