

Many of us come from New York's 29th district, which includes Schuyler, Steuben, Chemung, Allegany, Yates and parts of Monroe and Ontario counties. Elmira, Corning, and Watkins Glen all fall within the 29th, and our present Congressman, Randy Kuhl, is up for re-election in the fall. On Thursday, February 7th, I sat down with his opponent, Mr. Eric Massa of Corning, to discuss his campaign and his positions on some of the issues facing our district in the upcoming congressional election.

Mr. Massa is a former naval commander and spent a large part of his impressive military career in the Middle East, "from Alexandria to Oman," as he put it, and he said some things that surprised me. The Middle East has been portrayed to us in the news and by our politicians as an inherently hostile place, a region of the world where it is absolutely unsafe to be an American, and it is - now. But according to Massa, there was a time when America was very popular with Middle Easterners - before the war in Iraq.

As a man who holds "a masters degree in waging war" from the Navy War College, Mr. Massa is no stranger to the tactical and strategic necessities of waging a war on foreign soil. When asked about the current situation in Afghanistan, he said that our policy had been disastrous from day one in large part due to two major shortcomings - that the Bush administration ignored the lessons of the first Gulf War and of Bosnia, and that they allowed themselves to become distracted by a disastrous war in Iraq.

Like many former soldiers, he was modest when I brought up his military record, saying of his career that "it was something that happened to me, not because of me." When asked about his military experience in comparison to that of most of the nation's politicians, he said that military service was not necessary, or even always desirable, in our republic: "We have today the fewest number of veterans serving in the United States Congress than we have ever had. ...As military service becomes less and less universal, as a smaller percentage of the population has served in the military, we're seeing that reflected in those who represent us in Congress."

That, and veterans don't usually have the "millions of dollars" necessary to run for Congress. As Mr. Massa put it, "Veterans don't have money, and the number one issue today in a race at the federal level like Congress, is money. It takes millions of dollars to run a Congressional campaign, and veterans are not a constituency that has deep pockets..."

But there is a need for some military experience among members of Congress, especially while the nation is enmeshed in a "war of occupation and attrition" in Iraq. We need that experience to "ask the tough questions," and to ensure that the people have adequate representation. There are very few veterans in office these days - but, as Mr. Massa assured me, those veterans who are serving in our government tend to ask "tough questions - ... the right questions." And while his experience would certainly lend a unique and qualified perspective on the state of things in the Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a considerable amount of expertise in conducting a successful war, there are many in both parties who see his career as a problem. When asked why Massa explained that:

“On the liberal end of it, many are very fearful of military people going into government; on the conservative end of it, I am discounted because I don’t agree with President Bush, and therefore my military experience is almost traitorous. And when you look at the extremes, that’s the story you hear; but the reality is I’m smack in the middle, and I know I’m doing something right, because I’m angering the fringes on both sides.”

While we were on the subject of Iraq, Mr. Massa expressed his regrets that the war has dropped below notice in the news - and his disgust with the trillions of dollars wasted on this administrations escapades in the Middle East. By following a very simple strategy, the Colin Powell Doctrine, he called it, which is the same strategic outline we followed in the Balkans crisis of the mid-90’s, Mr. Massa believes that we could have our troops home in eighteen months: “By recognizing that there are three semi-autonomous regions, by allowing the Iraqis to set up a federal government of their choosing, and by leaving.”

As we discussed the permanent military installations built in Iraq by the Bush administration, a note of disgust crept into his voice; like many Democrats, and many of us, Massa advocates the end of our occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, an end to our permanent military bases there: “We have no reason to maintain 300,000 Americans in Iraq... We’ve built military bases the cumulative size of the state of Connecticut, permanent military bases, and that’s not right. We are not an empire, we are a democracy;”

Moving into other things, I asked why he decided to run for Congress. Massa replied that while many people assumed, due to his military experience, that it was the war in Iraq: “That’s not actually true... About ten years ago; I was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and given four months to live. That experience is really what has drawn me into the political arena.. Every year a new generation of Americans steps into the health care market, and many of them are stunned to find out that its going to cost them eight hundred dollars a month just to go to the doctor... the American health care system is broken - its catastrophically broken, and we have 47 million Americans who don’t have health insurance, which means that we have the most expensive, least efficient health care system in the world - and there’s a better way. The problem is: are we brave enough as a nation to recognize that we can learn from other countries and actually build a better system?... It’s easy to wave the American flag, complain about the French, and say that we have the best of everything in the world when we don’t. So, it’s going to take a little bravery, and a little bit of self inspection to realize we could do this better and that’s why I’m running for Congress;”

While we were on the subject, I asked if he thought either of the Democratic Presidential candidates had an inherently superior health care plan. He said that “either one of their plans is far superior to McCain, who believes in returning to a free market approach, meaning that health care is a commodity that will compete in a demand access market just like Coca Cola, Q-Tips and Quickie Lube.”

Sounds like a proper capitalist answer, except that demand for health care is not constant. As Mr. Massa observed when we spoke, no one can predict when they will need to see a doctor, and who goes to see one unless they need to? As Mr. Massa put it: “Because health care can’t be modeled like other commodities, this concept of the free market approach will fail, has failed, and in fact has been rejected by 26 of the 27 industrialized nations in the world. Only we believe somehow that for-profit HMO’s are in fact securing this nation’s health care future. It’s obvious they’re not, because 47 million Americans can’t go to an HMO; so, if functionally a third of the competitive population can’t access the market, then the free market is not the answer.”

As he said, Health Care is Massa’s pet issue, and he speaks about it very seriously: “Every American deserves to have what every member of Congress has already given themselves, period. And I won’t rest until they do.”

Mr. Massa has been talking about the economy for a long time. While the Republican candidate and the Bush administration were busy lauding the robustness of the stock market, Mr. Massa was trying to explain “the reality that the underpinning of our economy, the foundation of our economy, has been destroyed... We’re not facing a recession in this country; we’re already in a recession. We’re going to have to fight to stay out of a depression.”

Because of the economic blunders of the Bush administration, and the unworkable fairy tale of trickle-down economics, our nation is in serious trouble, and we need to address the problems. As we are all aware, student loans have become ridiculously expensive, and millions of Americans are teetering on the edge of foreclosure and homelessness. As Massa pointed out, our nation has not been in such terrible economic straits since the great depression of the 1930’s.

And the solution, according the Massa, is to restore some of Works Progress Administration programs of President Franklin Roosevelt, in order to create a “true infrastructure reclamation project” and fix not only our economy, but our decaying highways- especially here in the 29th.

We need a massive influx of infrastructure spending, both in our district and in the nation at large, according to Massa, and we need to do away with the shameless pork-barreling of Congressional earmarks. It the duty of members of Congress to return tax dollars to their constituents - but in the form of federal services like the expanded State child healthcare program, rather than bridges to nowhere or bowling alleys in Canandaigua.

We next discussed the No Child Left Behind Act, which Mr. Massa calls “every child left unfunded,” and the candidate stated a fairly simple position. The program, he said, is ridiculous, and its focus on teaching tests instead of material is philosophically repugnant.

“But the legislation is there, and...my best bet is to demand that it at least get funded, because in rural communities like Corning/Panted Post or Tuscarora...it’s costing a tremendous amount of money just to implement this incredible unfunded mandate from

Washington... The strength of the American educational system comes from the strength of the participation of local communities, not in the strength of dominance of Washington D.C. in our educational system,” Massa said.

As we wrapped up the interview, I asked Mr. Massa why citizens of the 29th district who are students at CCC should vote for him.

“Let’s be very honest:” he replied, “we live in a district where a lot of people are registered Republicans, who may have never voted for a Democrat in their entire lives because of their vision of what a Democrat is. They’d be very surprised to know that I’m an exceptionally strong supporter of the Second Amendment, that I’ve been a churchgoing man with my family my whole life...that I served for 26 years in the military, and that I enjoy working in the dirt or changing the oil in my car just as much as the next guy...If you’re sick and tired of how your government in Washington has been treating you, then you really have one thing you have to ask yourself, and that is ‘is it time to change who’s representing you? Are we going to do more of the same, and get more of what we’ve got, or are we going to try something different?’”

And Mr. Massa is adamant that his campaign is something different. “I don’t accept money from corporate lobbyists- at all,” he said, “the only people that I owe an answer to are the people that I’m representing from this district.”

Several times, Mr. Massa reiterated the need for change, most notably when we discussed the course of the Presidential election. While Mr. Massa spoke very highly of both Democratic candidates, his opinion of Senator McCain, who seems almost certain to take the Republican nomination, were less than charitable: “His entire vision for the future is rooted in the mind of an angry old man, whose visions come from 1972. We need a new way of doing business - his generation is done. Thank you, we’ve got to now clean up and go forward.”

Central to Mr. Massa’s campaign - and the entire Democratic platform - is the concept of a real and abiding change in American politics, and he seems well-prepared to deliver. While in the past, it has been almost a heresy for any candidate to express even a passing respect for an opponent, Mr. Massa openly expressed agreement with Mike Huckabee’s position on the economy. He is not a Washington insider, or even a Democratic Party insider, and many of his policies seem to blur the lines between liberal and conservative.

To get involved, or just learn more about Mr. Massa’s campaign, visit www.Massaforcongress.com, where everything from a summary of the candidate’s positions on major issues to campaign photos and recorded speeches are available. To learn more about our district, current issues facing Congress, or the positions of the incumbent Congressman Randy Kuhl, visit either the US House of Representatives website at www.house.gov or Congressman Kuhl’s site at www.kuhl.house.gov.