

[The Arizona Republic](#)

Michael Ferraresi

Federal politics is an unforgiving, unglamorous business.

As Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., explained, he eats lots of sandwich dinners on the run - often digesting more briefings and proposed bills than actual food.

But the freshman congressman, the oldest freshman in the current class of representatives, said the job has meaningful surprises.

For instance, a recent transportation security briefing led him through a hidden elevator from the crypt beneath the Capitol rotunda to a secure room with wood panels and a giant world map where intelligence briefings are held.

"Every day I discover something new about that place," said Mitchell, who represents Arizona's Congressional District 5, which includes Tempe, Ahwatukee, Scottsdale, the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Community and Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation.

"As a former teacher of government, it's very exciting," Mitchell said.

The former Tempe mayor and high school history teacher said the often bitter partisanship in Washington is something he never experienced as mayor of Tempe, working with city officials to better a single municipality.

However, as House chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of Veterans Affairs and a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, he said he feels like he's playing a role in helping improve the federal government.

"I think a lot of people are embarrassed that Congress has such a low rating, so they want to make it work," Mitchell said.

Iraq: More diplomacy needed

Mitchell said he would like to see the U.S. take a more diplomatic position in helping design the new government in Iraq, and in dealing with leaders in Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle.

The congressman said he felt like a general shift in direction is evident in Congress after recent benchmarks for troop withdrawal were set. He and other politicians maintain that the fledgling government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki needs to do a better job of meeting the expectations for the security of a unified Iraq.

"I would say the (U.S.) military has done a terrific job in Iraq," Mitchell said. "They destroyed the Iraqi army, they captured Saddam Hussein, and they seem to be, when they're in certain areas, keeping the violence down.

"But you can't just bring a country together on military might or force by itself. It's got to be done politically, economically and diplomatically," he said.

Congress receives an update in September on the situation in Iraq when Gen. David Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Iraq, and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker provide new details.

'Obligation' to all veterans

Mitchell's first seven months in Congress have helped him - and his constituents - recognize some of the flaws with the administrative process that veterans rely on for support.

Mitchell has made no secret about what he describes as poor budget planning in Veterans Affairs and lapses in administration. Veterans wounded in combat, he said, should not have to wait in line.

"Part of our obligation as a nation is that these people are taken care of, that they get what they need," Mitchell said.

Mitchell added that former Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley, a Vietnam veteran who lost parts of both his legs in combat, could be a viable candidate to replace Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson, who announced his resignation earlier this year.