

Rokita discusses ISIS, education and debt

By **MATTHEW BUTLER**

INDIANAPOLIS – When we sat down with U.S. Rep. Todd Rokita Tuesday we expected most of our time to be dedicated to priorities he has long championed, entitlement reform and eliminating bureaucratic red tape.

"We've been fighting it since day one," Rokita explained of entitlement reform. "It's the main reason I ran for Congress." Sitting on the Budget Committee, Rokita has tackled these issues head on, touting the first cuts in spending since the end of the Korean War and his proposal to reform Medicaid.

As well as touching on those efforts, Rokita wanted to emphasize work he was doing as chairman of the subcommittee on K-12 education. Asked by Speaker John Boehner to chair, in fact, his former committee, Rokita was quite surprised. However, he quickly appreciated the importance of its remit and accepted. "And, yes, I'm one who doesn't think there is any federal role in education," he added. But he acknowledges, he can lead reforms in the meantime, like the Student Success Act. "It's the first time an education reauthorization bill has seen passage in 13 years," he explained. "That was my signature bill; it came through my committee. It replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was Speaker Boehner's signature bill and I got him to vote for it."

Describing the Student Success Act, Rokita said unlike NCLB, it gives authority and money to states and local schools. "Yes, we agree with accountability," he commented, "but the local level can determine what success is." Rokita was also proud the bill prevented Common Core from being a prerequisite for Department of Education funding. "If we get a Republican Senate, I predict it will be one of the major pieces of legislation that will move next term," he added.

Rokita called attention to bipartisanship within his committee, noting last week's reauthorization of early childhood block grants. "That was bipartisan, bicameral and should be on the way to the President's desk by the end of the year," he explained. Another accomplishment already passed into law was streamlining education re-

search. And, Rokita is working with U.S Rep. George Miller (D-California) to expand charter schools. Looking to next year, Rokita wants his committee to address student data privacy and school nutrition. He wants to further investigate what he believes are overly high rates of free lunches at schools.

Outside of education and tackling the debt, another Rokita legislative priority for next year is comprehensive civil service reform. "It's going to take several cues from the VA reforms we did earlier this year but go a lot farther," he told HPI. "First, it's going to outlaw public sector unions, not unlike what Mitch Daniels did the second day on the job through executive order. I think public sector unions should be illegal not because I'm anti-union – I come from Lake County, okay, I grew up on unions and get the social economic value they give – but because private sector unions have a natural circuit breaker. If a union gets out of balance or too aggressive it drives the company into bankruptcy. A public sector union doesn't have that circuit breaker." Additional reforms would include more accountable pay raises, forfeiture of pension annuities for convicted felons, allowing for demotions if warranted, and future hires to be considered "at-will employees."

Entitlement Reform

Entitlement reforms remain Rokita's lodestar. "Ten thousand Baby Boomers retiring every day into unreformed social entitlement programs is what is driving our debt," Rokita said. "And that will escalate vertically if you look graphically." He outlined those outlays: 63 percent of federal spending is on Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, "a smorgasbord of other social welfare programs," and debt servicing. Rokita says that aggregation will eventually account for 90 percent.

"Everyone wants to focus on the discretionary spending," Rokita said. "Sequester is not going to continue to be a palatable answer if these entitlement programs continue to balloon unreformed."

With his Budget Committee colleagues, Rokita says Republicans have put forward a reform package. "We took the extra step, even though some said it was political suicide, to put a narrative in about what's really driving our debt and what we had to do. So you see Paul Ryan and I and others producing Medicare reforms. You see me with the most mature idea within the Republican Caucus on reforming Medicaid. And you saw elements of my Medicaid bill in the budget the last three years."

Rokita emphasized that none of their proposed reforms impact those



currently enrolled or soon to enroll. Instead, it will impact the middle-aged and younger “who have time to prepare for retirement and who are going to live a lot closer to 100.” He believes eligibility age increases should be on the table as well as other changes. “Perhaps a more aggressive means test for these programs. That’s a huge tax increase,” Rokita noted. “This Republican would be for that if it meant changing the trajectory of this debt load. I think that’s pretty courageous quite frankly; I’m willing to do those kind of things.

“What did we get from that? From the Democratic Party did we get a better idea?”

Immigration Reform

Rokita also feels the Democrats are offering little in terms of tackling the recent border crisis and influx of unaccompanied minors from Central America. He touted being among caucus members who demanded an ambitious bill which dedicated funding and redirected foreign aid to the respective countries in order to house, clothe, treat, and educate unaccompanied minors instead of dispersing them throughout the country with little oversight.

“First off, he caused this crisis,” Rokita said of the President. “He unilaterally said he was not going to enforce some of our immigration laws regarding ‘the Dreamers.’ If you look at the human-telephone nature of that, the rest of the world thought, ‘Come stick your toe in the U.S. and it will be okay.’ So now we have this massive rush.”

What about the strong incentive for parents to send their children unaccompanied since, if they make it, they will be processed and dispersed awaiting an eventual hearing? “It’s a terrible magnet,” said Rokita. “There are horrific stories of what happens to these kids along the way. Why is he doing this, but to garner votes from constituencies that are already here and the liberal left.”

Moreover, Rokita is concerned with border security. He noted some 75 different nationalities have been captured trying to cross the southern border recently. “If we had a workable E-Verify system that was universal,” Rokita believes, technology and policies punishing delinquent employers could severely discourage illegal immigration.

Confronting ISIS

The Congressman’s appraisal on what has been a recent preoccupation in Washington and globe, ISIS: “It was good to see the unity on Congressional approval to support arming Syrian rebels. It’s why I was a ‘yes’ vote. I know there are huge differences of opinion and very good opinions for ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ I saw, as some others did, that the world was watching us. It’s my opinion the President

got us in this situation in the first place by announcing a leave from Iraq and no residual forces left behind. After six years going around the world apologizing for your country and bowing to others you get this. I think he has generally made himself irrelevant and after six years has made us irrelevant. So when he came and said I want to do this, knowing that we only have one commander-in-chief, I said okay, I will help.”

We noted President Obama sought approval for airstrikes roughly a year ago against the Assad regime after it used chemical weapons on its own people and rebels but both parties, especially Republicans, exhibited opposition and little unity as the world watched. Rokita answered that the perception of danger has since changed for the public and lawmakers: “Here the threat is ISIS and the country is much more unified against ISIS than it was about going into Syria. I heard that loud and clear. One year ago I heard two things when I was back in the state:

Don’t go into Syria and stand up against ‘Obamacare.’” Now, Rokita says he’s not hearing opposition from his constituents on Syrian actions “at all.”

“The best evidence I’ve seen that ISIS is a national security threat,” Rokita explained, “is that 300 or so have U.S. passports.”

Noting Rep. Rokita’s strong fiscal conservative rhetoric and votes, we asked where he stood on allocating yet more spending to prop up the highly unreliable Iraqi army as well as relatively unknown rebel groups. Rokita said congressional approval for arming and training the rebels “had a lot more safeguards than previous votes.” He promised more oversight, hearings, and debate in the near future. He stressed he, “as a small ‘I’ libertarian,” wants the U.S. to be more selective in its overseas interventions without becoming isolationist.

What about the cost overhang of the Iraq War in terms of caring for veterans, citing some figures approaching \$4 trillion? Rokita said cost projections foresee declining expenditure when the WWII generation is no longer with us. Rokita added that defense outlays “are not driving our debt.” Nonetheless, he presses for greater accountability of the Defense Department. “It’s one of the few departments which cannot be audited,” he told HPI, “not because there is a statute against it; it’s because they are so big and so sloppy they cannot present evidence at an audit table of what they spend on.”

Delegation

Noting the success and general collegiality on display among Indiana’s entire congressional delegation at last week’s Indiana Chamber ‘Fly In’ event, we asked Rep. Rokita his thoughts on potential cooperation. “We genuinely like and complement each other,” Rokita explained. “I



think the delegation is punching above its weight compared to its seniority and I think that's a great thing."

Earlier this summer, U.S. Rep. Luke Messer noted that over 50 percent of Congress is new but leadership remains the same. Bothered by that, he is running to chair the Republican House Study Committee. "I'm supportive of him," Rokita said. "I hope he wins." As for leadership, Rokita paused and said his style probably prevented him from making the Ways and Means Committee. Nonethe-

less, he says he appreciates the difficulties of leadership and respects their experience on the Hill. "I don't pretend to think I could do as good a job as John Boehner or others in leadership."

"I was on Kevin McCarthy's inner circle whip team for his promotion after Eric Cantor lost," Rokita told us. (Fellow Indiana delegate Marlin Stutzman also pursued that leadership vacancy.) "I feel I'm able to affect policy and strategy with leadership by actually helping them." ❖