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## THEY SAID IT

“What a small, graceless man Kerry is. The nature of adversarial politics in a democratic society makes George W. Bush his opponent. But it was entirely Kerry’s choice to expand the field, to put himself on the other side of Allawi and the Iraqi people. Given his frequent boasts that he knows how to reach out to America’s allies, it’s remarkable how often he feels the need to insult them: Britain, Australia, and now free Iraq. But, because this pampered cipher has floundered for 18 months to find any rationale for his candidacy other than his indestructible belief in his own indispensability, Kerry finds himself a month before the election with no platform to run on other than American defeat. He has decided to co-opt the jihadist death-cult, the Baathist dead-enders, the suicide bombers and other misfits and run as the candidate of American failure. This would be shameful if he weren’t so laughably inept at it.

“Still, you can understand why, inside the Democrat-media cocoon, the senator’s bet on the collapse of a free Iraq doesn’t sound quite as revolting as it does to the average Iraqi.”

--Mark Steyn, “Kerry’s Looking for America’s Failure – And He’s It,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, Sept. 26, 2004.

## KERRY AND IRAQ: A LOSING COMBINATION

I am always amazed at how quickly the wishful rantings and spin of partisan operatives can be embraced by the mainstream press and turned, almost overnight, into conventional wisdom or even historical “fact.” This spring, for example, the mainstream media decided that Howard Dean was eliminated from the race for his party’s presidential nomination because Democratic primary voters had decided that he was, quite simply, too unstable to have a realistic shot at unseating President Bush in November. In this now-established telling of the tale, the infamous “Dean Scream” plays a central role, serving as the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back, turning voters against the mad doctor for good.

It appears not to matter that this version of events presents a bit of a timeline problem. If you’ll recall, the scream took place at a rally in Iowa, *after* Dean’s stunning and embarrassing defeat in the Iowa caucuses. Scream or no scream, Iowa Democrats had already overwhelmingly rejected Dean; and voters in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and elsewhere were preparing to do the same.

### In this Issue

Kerry and Iraq:  
A Losing Combination

More Post-Election  
Predictions

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Nevertheless, the myth of Dean's rejection for being too volatile endures and, more to the point, resonates through media and Democratic circles, where commitment to ideology and devotion to "the cause" trump such inconsequential concepts as "reality." In these precincts, it is an incontrovertible article of faith that Dean failed because voters concluded that he was personally nuts, not because they believed the anti-war platform on which he ran was nuts. To believe otherwise would be to admit that maybe the war in Iraq is not the "gimme" issue in this campaign, to concede perhaps that President Bush is not universally despised because of his "bungling" of the war in Iraq and the broader war on terror.

This is, I believe, an example of a pattern of behavior that Mark and I have cited numerous times over the last few months, by which the leaders of the Democratic Party have become entirely insulated from political reality. Democrats spin their yarn; the media spins it back to them; and Democrats end up believing the fiction they themselves invented, thinking that all is well because the media has pronounced it so.

This phenomenon is rather closely akin to that of "cocooning," a term that has been popularized of late by liberal blogger Mickey Kaus and which involves Democratic partisans (leaders, operatives, journalists, bloggers, etc.) lulling themselves into a false sense of security about the election by reading and accepting only information that confirms their expectations. In both cases, Democratic political decisions are based not on objective reality, but on self-fabricated conditions confirmed by allies in the media.

This is vitally important in the case of Howard Dean and Democratic voters' dismissal of him, because the Kerry campaign may well be over if there is any chance that the now-standard version of the story is wrong and that Dean was rejected not simply because he is a nut, but because he was peddling a position on the war in Iraq that some Democrats found offensive and others thought would be found offensive by a majority of voters.

You see, last week, the man who bested Dean because Democratic voters bought the line that his much-ballyhooed military service made him more "electable," decided, presumably at the behest of his horde of new Clintonite advisors, to make Iraq and the war on terror the defining issues of this campaign, and to begin, in the words of the left-leaning *Chicago Tribune*, "channeling Howard Dean" on Iraq.

Nearly all pundits and editorialists on the left and a majority of those on the right applauded the move, noting their satisfaction that the election will now hinge on the one issue that matters more than any of the others and suggesting that this is Kerry's last, best hope to turn around an otherwise struggling campaign. But I don't get it.

In my opinion, Kerry's move to make Iraq the center of this election puts him in a very precarious position that virtually ensures his defeat. It confirms concerns about the depth of his support; it plays to President Bush' strengths; and most important, it opens Kerry up to a new line of attack that would be damaging enough to any other Democrat, but if employed and employed effectively against Kerry, holds the potential to devastate completely his campaign.

First off, let me state that Iraq is not an entirely taboo subject. In fact, Kerry could and probably should have taken on the issue much earlier in this campaign. But the fact is that he should have approached it more delicately, from a different angle, and with more respect both for the commander-in-chief and the troops he leads. As it is, his focus on Iraq now appears puerile and desperate.

A number of commentators, including yours truly, the folks at various right-of-center journals, and the editorial board of *The Wall Street Journal*, have long suggested that President Bush's handling of Iraq has been something less than flawless and that he has left himself open to criticism from his right. If Kerry had chosen to offer such a critique, it is likely that it would have been greeted with considerable skepticism, but at least it would have been acknowledged as a legitimate and potentially helpful contribution to the discussion.

As things turned out, though, Kerry did not argue that the President has failed to prosecute the war aggressively enough. Instead, he took a hard turn to the left and suggested that Iraq was “the wrong war at the wrong time,” that Saddam should never have been toppled, and that the most important thing a President can do now is find a way to wriggle out of this mess and bring the troops home. This is not a tack that will, in my opinion, appeal to many moderate, independent, or undecided voters. Indeed, it will likely appeal only to that faction of the Democratic left that opposed the war from the beginning, supported the wacky Dr. Dean, and has been grumbling for several weeks that its party has abandoned this “noble” position.

In my forecast piece published before the Iowa Caucuses last January, I suggested that if the Democrats nominated anyone other than Dean (the only passable anti-war candidate) that the anti-war left would grow restive and complicate the efforts of the nominee. And while there has been precious little discussion in the media of the anti-warriors’ feelings about Kerry, it is clear from the moves the Kerry camp has made over the last couple of weeks that it is intensely concerned about their loyalty and, more specifically, enthusiasm. Kerry’s newfound interest in Iraq is, it would seem, related to these concerns. It constitutes an attempt to shore up his base and to convince the anti-war contingent that he does, indeed, offer a real alternative to President Bush on this issue. The deep-seated problem is that it is always a very bad sign for a campaign when a candidate is compelled to shore up his base this late in the game.

Certainly, Kerry’s sudden and apparently definitive shift to the left on Iraq is unlikely to win him much support from the independent, centrist voters who will decide this election. I know that a great many commentators of all ideologies have congratulated Kerry for engaging the key issue in this election, but as I noted above, I don’t get it. And I’m not alone. On Friday, *Wall Street Journal* editorial board member and columnist Holman Jenkins noted that Kerry’s new and presumably ultimate position on Iraq is a “gamble” that “depends heavily on Iraqi insurgents waging a

successful terrorist campaign to discredit Mr. Bush’s handling of the war.” And “Rooting for the other side,” Jenkins concluded “is not good politics.”

More importantly, perhaps, former Clinton chief political strategist Dick Morris (who despite the “quirks” that compelled his dismissal from the Clinton team, still possesses one of the keenest political minds around) argued last week that Kerry’s position on Iraq will prove a disastrous mistake, as it plays right into President Bush’s hands and makes it very easy for the Bush campaign to paint the Senator from Massachusetts as an out-of-touch liberal who is concerned more about multilateral face-saving than pursuing American interests in the broader war against radical Islam. Specifically, Morris wrote:

Kerry’s right flank is now gapingly vulnerable to a Bush attack. According to Scott Rasmussen’s tracking polls, 30 to 40 percent of Kerry’s voters disagree with his new leftward tilt on Iraq. That is, even as the Democrat condemned the war in Iraq as a “diversion” from the central mission of the war on terror, a large minority of his own voters disagrees and sees it as “integral” to the battle to respond to 9/11.

Kerry has moved to the left, leaving about one-third of his vote behind. Bush can now move in and peel off Kerry’s moderate supporters. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has opened the door for this new Bush offensive by declaring the invasion of Iraq “illegal” and equating the deadly terror raids by Iraqi guerillas with the embarrassing but hardly lethal sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by the U.S. military. With those incendiary claims put into play, it is now legitimate for Bush to attack the secretary-general and ask his opponent to take a stand for or against Annan’s remarks.

In his current incarnation as a dove, Kerry dares not dissent too sharply from the views of the U.N. leader. Bush can develop a

key campaign issue over whether it is legal for the United States to act in its own self-defense without obtaining Security Council approval. Ratification by an assemblage of nations bribed through the Oil-for-Food program should not be a prerequisite for American action.

The real question now is how aggressively the Bush administration will press the issue of Kerry's newfound dovishness and its effect on the troops, on America's enemies, and on the nation as a whole. If he were running against almost any other Democrat, I would expect the President not to challenge his opponent directly. As Mark and I have complained time and time again over the past couple of years, one of the most frustrating aspects of the President's personality is his unwillingness directly to engage the conversation and explain himself and his policies. I suspect, though, that this time, with Kerry as the opponent, and with election (and by extension the W. Bush legacy) on the line, the President will fully respond to Kerry and his broadsides against the Iraq war.

Throughout the campaign, Karl Rove and the rest of the President's strategists have followed what could be called a Morris-Lite approach. Either by design or coincidence, Rove et al have made many of the moves advocated by Morris, though generally less assertively. And I suspect the counter-attack against the new Iraq war policy will also follow the Morris pattern, as detailed above.

Already, for example, President Bush has called Kerry out for the effect his criticism of the war is having both on the Iraqi people, who are still uncertain whether they can count on the United States to keep its promises this time, and on the troops, who look to the commander-in-chief for leadership. On Wednesday, Bush countered Kerry, calling his opponents' war rhetoric damaging to morale. He put it thusly:

My opponent is sending mixed signals. You cannot expect the Iraqi people to stand up and do the hard work of democracy if you're pessimistic about their ability to govern themselves. You cannot expect our troops to continue to do the hard work if they hear mixed messages from Washington, D.C.

I expect that this is only the beginning of the counter-assault on Kerry. And while the Bush strategists have generally been less aggressive than folks like Dick Morris have recommended, I doubt that they will take it easy in this case, in large part because they smell blood in the water and see an opportunity to put Kerry away.

We have long argued that Kerry is an exceptionally poor candidate given the current political atmosphere (the wrong candidate and the wrong time, if you will), and this is one example why. Kerry is, even among his Democratic colleagues, uniquely vulnerable to counter charges that, by vocally disparaging the war effort, he is undermining the war effort and endangering soldiers' lives and the well-being of the nation.

Over the last few days, a number of commentators have noted that if the Democrats were going to settle on anti-Iraq message, they should have found someone other than Kerry to carry their banner, someone who would have been more capable of attacking Bush forcefully with an anti-war message.

Some have suggested that a candidate like Dean, who was anti-war from the start and who hadn't, like Kerry's, voted to authorize the war, would have been more effective at challenging Bush. Others, including *National Review* editor-at-large Jonah Goldberg, have argued that Wesley Clark, who has the military credentials to criticize the conduct of the war and to offer a more credible exit strategy, would have been a better choice.

But no one, to my knowledge at least, has addressed the most obvious and, in my opinion, most devastating point. That is, that when Bush charges that Kerry is

undermining the war effort, encouraging the nation's enemies, discouraging its in-country allies, dispiriting its soldiers, and generally trying to divide the nation over the war specifically for political gain, these charges will have particular resonance because they will illustrate a pattern of behavior. In other words, *John Kerry has done all these things before.*

The anti-war left likes to talk about "learning the lessons of Vietnam." But they alone among their countrymen appear not to have learned that lesson. In the early 70s, John Kerry, while still a naval officer (albeit in the naval reserves), actively campaigned against the war in Vietnam. He testified publicly that vast numbers of American soldiers had committed and continued to commit heinous war crimes on a routine basis. He met on neutral ground (Paris, natch) with America's enemies, in the person Madame Binh, at least once and possibly as many as three times. And in a gesture of disdain, he very publicly threw away his medals, or his ribbons, or whatever. In short, he played an active role in undermining domestic support for the war, which ultimately resulted in the fall of Saigon and the victory by this nation's enemies.

On Friday, columnist Amir Taheri wrote that Kerry's exit strategy for the current war "reflects his belief that Iraq is another Vietnam." Taheri concedes that Kerry "is not proposing a 'last chopper from Saigon' strategy," but one could be forgiven for thinking that Kerry's anti-war message might somehow lead eventually to a similar result. It did the first time, after all.

The Democrats and their allies in the mainstream media have portrayed John Kerry's new "cut-and-run" strategy for Iraq as a reasonable political alternative to George Bush's stubbornness. But these two have colluded to deceive themselves about Iraq before.

Americans may not be terribly pleased with the way the Iraq war has been handled thus far. But my guess is that a majority of voters understand that surrendering the leadership of a major Middle Eastern oil-producing nation like Iraq to fanatical Muslims would be a disaster of many magnitudes greater than

the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists. That indeed, the extent of the problem would be so great that electing a man like Kerry, who is an unknown quantity at best, would not be worth the risk.

Thus, while Kerry may, as his media supporters have noted, have finally engaged the central issue of this campaign, I doubt seriously that that will help much. If anything, it will probably hurt him.

## MORE POST-ELECTION PREDICTIONS

Two months ago, in an article entitled "Bush Unbound," Mark suggested that after the election American forces would go strongly on the offensive, seeking, for starters, to eliminate or at least neutralize the looming nuclear threats in Iran and North Korea. Specifically, he wrote:

The United States is going to go on the military offensive sometime soon after President Bush is reelected. Count on it. The principal target will be Iran. But Syria and North Korea will be in the sights also.

I am not talking about "increased diplomatic pressure" here. I am talking about air strikes and possibly even military incursions into Iran, along with unequivocal instructions to Syria and North Korea outlining what actions must be taken by them in order to avoid immediate military strikes by the United States. I am talking about the kind of instructions that are intended to be provocative. I am talking about big sweat beads forming on the foreheads of the Mad Mullahs in Iran and the young scions of tyranny who run Syria and North Korea.

And while Mark took a little heat from some readers who thought his assessment too provocative, the intervening weeks have confirmed that military aggressiveness is a virtual certainty in the immediate future.

For obvious reasons, the President has been extremely cautious over the last several months, trying to postpone the inevitable until after November 2<sup>nd</sup>. But the likelihood of more forceful American action after the election is increasingly certain for a variety of reasons. The situation in Iraq is growing unstable and violence is escalating in the run up to that nation's elections, necessitating a vigorous response. The Mad Mullahs of Iran are growing more and more aggressive in thumbing their noses at the international nuclear arms control regime. The international community, including many of John Kerry's European allies and the much-ballyhooed multinational organizations, appears content to let the Iranians develop nuclear weapons technology. And perhaps most importantly, Israeli officials are beginning openly to declare their anxiety about Iran's nuclear capability.

To start with, it is clear that the situation in Iraq is, at least for the time being, growing less, not more stable. But this is hardly unexpected. The Islamofascist terrorists and Baathist remnants responsible for the violence know that both the American and Iraqi elections are approaching quickly, and they believe that they can disrupt one or both by cranking up the level of violence.

These thugs are, as Iraqi Prime Minister Awad Alawi noted last week, making a desperate last stand to keep the election in Iraq from taking place as planned. We have been warned repeatedly to be prepared for this both by Bush administration officials and by the leaders of free Iraq. And anyone who pretends that this was unanticipated is being intentionally obtuse. Furthermore, anyone who accuses the Iraqi leaders of being "puppets" for saying so is being, well, an ass.

That said, it also becoming clear that the situation in Fallujah, for example, was handled poorly the first time around and must therefore be addressed in a second sweep. Fallujah is a mess and a harbor for Baathist dead-enders and foreign terrorists. If there is ever to be stability in Iraq, that mess needs to be cleaned up. And cleaning it up will be difficult and bloody for both sides, otherwise it would have been done by now. Given the current political atmosphere,

the administration has gambled that the bloodshed (most of which will be Iraqi) must wait until after the election, lest the partisan cynics in the Kerry camp try to use it as a club to bash Bush.

But there is a very real chance this gamble will not pay off, and that the attack on Fallujah will have to begin before November. Already, American forces have stepped up air raids on the city, which has taken on the characteristics of the proverbial powder keg ready to explode.

If the relative calm holds until November, all the better for President Bush. If it does not, then the President's opponents will, in the form of dead American soldiers, get that club they seek so desperately in their pursuit of partisan political gain. In either case, rest assured that Fallujah will be revisited, likely with surprising forcefulness.

Of course, Fallujah will not be the only target of increased American forcefulness. I think, for example, that the "meaty mullah" himself, Moqtada al-Sadr, will become a priority to the newly "unbound" Bush administration, as will his patrons in Tehran.

Regarding this last point, Mark was pretty convinced in July that Iran would be a target in a second Bush administration, and I am even more certain of this today. The Mad Mullahs' pursuit of nuclear weapons continues virtually unimpeded, and every day their dreams grow closer and closer to fulfillment.

I know that the folks at the EU and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) say they have a handle on the problem, but one could be forgiven for questioning the sincerity of some of those assuring us that all is well. Despite the fact that John Kerry now insists that all the Iran situation needs is some thoughtful, intense, and earnest negotiation, those who have been negotiating up to this point (Great Britain, France, Germany), have produced precious few results and likely have encouraged the Mullahs to believe that they can act with impunity.

The Bush administration will reportedly push the IAEA to refer Iran to the U.N. Security Council for sanctions at the Agency's November meeting. But again, one can be forgiven for questioning the value in such a referral. Some of our ostensible allies on the Security Council (France, Russia) are likely to oppose sanctions and actually continue to play a role in aiding Iran's "peaceful" nuclear enterprises. And there have been reports of late that some within the IAEA, the watchdog to whom we've entrusted our interests in Iran, have been coaching the mullahs on how to avoid said sanctions.

In any case, I am convinced that the mullahs' nuclear ambitions will be halted very early in President Bush's second term for a couple of reasons. First, these ambitions pose a very grave threat to global stability and American interests throughout the Persian Gulf. And second, Israel appears more and more to believe that Iranian nuclear ambitions threaten its very existence and therefore must not be realized.

Earlier this month, *National Review's* Jay Nordlinger visited Israel for a series of meetings with well-placed Israelis both in and out of government. His report, which was serialized over five days on NRO and covered some 30-plus pages of text, returned time and again to the subject of Iran and its nukes. According to Nordlinger, "all [Israelis] agree that an emergency has arrived." He spoke with several prominent Israeli thinkers of varying partisan affiliation and ideological predisposition, who were willing not only to discuss the issue on the record, but conceded that the problem will require a solution in the very near future. Included among his interviewees were: an academic, a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, a television personality and Arab "expert," the former head of the Mossad, and a former defense minister.

Now, I don't want you get the wrong idea. Pat Buchanan's new book didn't "convert" me. And I haven't suddenly seen the error of my neocon-induced ways and become wise to the Israeli plot to manipulate American foreign policy. But there is little question

that Israeli concern about Iran can have an effect on the way the U.S. government views the issue. And this is precisely as it should be.

If that many prominent Israelis see Iranian bluster as a serious, nation-threatening crisis, and if the Iranians continue to give them good cause for believing so (as they did over the weekend, when they announced a successful test of a "strategic missile," presumably the Shahab-3 which is capable of reaching Israel), then it's only a matter of time before action must be taken. And if Bush (or, I suppose, Kerry) won't take that action, then, one has to assume the Israelis will. This assumption is buttressed, of course, by the fact that last week, Israeli military officials announced that they had contracted to purchase some 5000 smart bombs, including 500 "bunker busters," which they would presumably use against underground Iranian nuclear facilities.

Certainly, President Bush's Middle East efforts will suffer a serious, perhaps fatal setback if the Israelis undertake any operation to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. And the Israelis will do everything they can to avoid having to do so. Nevertheless, many Israelis believe – and not without good cause – that their nation's very existence is at stake, and that their leaders must do whatever is necessary to protect them, consequences be damned.

Let us not forget that the last time such a threat reared its ugly head in the Middle East, circa 1981, the Israelis took preemptive action, knowing full well that they would suffer the rebuke of every other nation in the world, including the United States. And while the criticism then was overwhelming, there is little question today that then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin made the right call. Had he not done what he did, it is a virtual certainty that millions more Arabs, including the Kuwaitis and the virulently anti-Israeli Saudis for starters, would have known firsthand Saddam Hussein's tyranny. Likewise, the Middle East would, today, be a very different and likely much more brutal place.

As the threat posed to Israel by Iranian nukes grows more and more real, the danger of preemptive Israeli action will also grow more and more real. And as the danger of preemptive Israeli actions grows more and more real, the likelihood that President Bush will act first, will also grow greater and greater. There is no question that Bush has ample justification for taking on the Mad Mullahs, irrespective of Israeli concerns. But if he can, in the process, keep the preponderance of the Arab world from using Israeli defensive actions as a pretext for starting a broader and deadlier conflict, all the better.

Mark and I have predicted that President Bush will “get tough” with Iran so many times that it is difficult to believe that he ever will. But what we and the other Iran hawks seem to forget sometimes is that President

Bush operates not just in a strategic environment, but in a political one as well. While taking out the mullahcracy is a strategic “gimme,” it could very well be political poison, particularly if, like the process of taming Iraq, it proves more difficult than initially expected. And in the middle of a re-election campaign, the last thing the President needs is be dosed with that poison.

Fortunately, assuming Bush wins, he will no longer have worry too much about the political environment and will be able to focus largely on the strategic. Unlike any President in recent memory, Bush will not have to worry about his own re-election or the presidential ambitions of his Vice President. He will, in short, be unbound, much as Mark predicted several weeks ago. And none too soon, if you ask me.

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