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**In this Issue**  
Senators, Presidents, and  
the War in Iraq

## THEY SAID IT

"I think if you're in a war, you don't want a poodle in there, you want a pit bull. I don't think that you want a guy in there going, 'Gee, I don't know. Maybe. Could be.' I think you want a guy in there who's either going to win it or lose it."



--Rock star Alice Cooper,  
June 20, 2005.  
(Hat tip for picture and quote:  
Arthur Chernkoff.)

## SENATORS, PRESIDENTS, AND THE WAR IN IRAQ.

It is hardly a well-kept secret in politics today that U. S. Senators make poor presidential candidates. In each of the last three elections, the loser has been a Senator or a former Senator, and the last Senator to be elected President was Richard Nixon, who has now been out of office for better than three decades. In the history of the nation, only two men, Warren G. Harding and John F. Kennedy, have moved directly from the Senate to the White House.

There are several theories as to why this is so. Some hypothesize that a Senate record, complete with arcane appropriations votes and other potentially embarrassing parliamentary minutia, is a hard thing to defend, particularly if the candidate has served in the Senate for any length of time. Others suggest that Senators simply make less appealing candidates than governors, who have already demonstrated the skills of and gained experience as government executives.

And while there is undoubtedly a certain amount of truth in both theories and in others like them, I think that a more obvious point is generally overlooked when trying to explain the abysmal record of recent Senate presidential wannabes, namely that they are, in the age of modern media, much more likely to say or do something stupid that will become national news than are governors or other low-profile potential candidates. A governor can, for instance, get away with saying a few really stupid things as long as no one

outside of his home state notices. But a Senator must be both careful and right all of the time, lest his or her every word be scrutinized thoroughly and any screw up end up being replayed over and over on the networks, talk radio, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, and a host of “new media” web sites.

I got to thinking about all of this last week as I read the comments made by a handful of Senators on the progress of the war in Iraq. Some of the usual suspects, that is to say Ted Kennedy, said some of the usual things: The war reminds him of Vietnam; the “insurgency” reminds him of Vietnam, Donald Rumsfeld reminds him of Vietnam; Guantanamo reminds him of Vietnam; fried cheese reminds him of Vietnam; vodka martinis remind him of fried cheese, which, in turn, reminds him of Vietnam, blah, blah, blah, Vietnam, *ad infinitum*.

Of course, Kennedy’s pretensions to higher office died many years ago, along with Mary Jo Kopechne under the bridge from Chappaquiddick Island, so his ramblings are of little consequence. But a number of other Senators, a couple from the President’s own party and at least two with explicit presidential ambitions, also opened their mouths and, to a man, made themselves look craven and potentially ridiculous.

Of all the comments, the most widely reported and therefore the most damaging – both to the war effort and to the respective speaker’s presidential ambitions – were uttered by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Joseph Biden (D-CT) and foreign policy “realist” and perennial Bush-bashing Republican Chuck Hagel (R-France), both of whom declared that they know more about what is really going on in Iraq than the President, Vice President, and the Secretaries of State and Defense, and both of whom did their part to buck up the enemy by suggesting that there is simply no hope, that all will soon be lost, and that maybe it’s time to think about gassing up the choppers and hurrying all American personnel over to the Pittman apartments to begin the airlift evacuation.

Biden, for his part, argued that “the reconstruction program in Iraq has thus far been a disaster” and suggested that the ultimate “disaster,” (i.e. failure) in Iraq is “a real possibility.” Meanwhile, Hagel took his criticism one step further, questioning the sanity of the President and Vice President, arguing that the administration’s assessment of the war is “disconnected from reality” and that “the reality is that we’re losing in Iraq.”

Now, what, you may ask, would prompt such aggressive denigration of the American war effort from two presidential hopefuls, one of whom hails from the President’s own party? Did something truly and extraordinarily awful happen in Iraq? Did the tide turn against American forces in some significant or even noticeable way? Did the terrorist “insurgency” demonstrate its unity or retake previously surrendered territory? Did the terrorists do anything at all that would suggest that they are gaining strength while the coalition forces are losing their resolve?

The answers to these last four questions are, of course, no, no, no, and no. As far as I can tell, the only thing that has happened over the past couple of weeks that would prompt such an outpouring of anti-war twaddle from these allegedly respected U. S. Senators was the release by various media and research organizations of a series of polls that show the American public is waning in its support for the war effort.

To be fair, both of these guys are long-time critics of the war and of the President, so it’s not as if these opinion polls caused them to change their minds on the war or suddenly to become peaceniks, which is more than can be said of some of President Bush’s other Capitol Hill critics last week. That said, the sinking polls almost certainly provided the political cover each man believed he needed to restate his opposition to the war and to make it clear to potential future voters that if things do, indeed, turn out badly, they were among the “we told you so” crowd long before the other kids on the block thought it was cool.

Unfortunately for both, but especially for Hagel, I suspect that they have not only misunderstood what is actually happening on the ground in Iraq, but have also grossly misinterpreted the meaning of the apparent public discontent with the war.

Biden's problem – and Ted Kennedy's, and John Kerry's, and Howard Dean's, and Barbara Boxer's – is that he has made an assumption about the American public that, while popular across the political spectrum, is, I believe, largely false. Biden and his fellow Democrats have, since Vietnam, bought into the idea that Americans are simply unwilling to accept any conflict that produces any significant number of casualties; that they have, essentially, “gone soft.” This is the reason, by the way, that Bill Clinton ruled out a ground war in Kosovo before hostilities had even begun, much to the dismay of his generals, including the now-deranged Wesley Clark. Clinton, his advisors, and his partisan allies, all believed in the “soft America” notion and therefore supposed that the public would not tolerate even a minimal number of American casualties.

This is also the reason that a significant subset of Democrats and their allies (including folks like Michael Moore, Gary Trudeau, Ted Koppel, and a host of others) believe that the most powerful and most effective way to protest the war is to enumerate the fallen soldiers in some way. So while a normal person may think it a little odd or tiresome to open the funny pages on Sunday morning and find the names of all the American war dead listed where one would normally expect to see Zonker or Duke making some painfully stale joke about how dumb Bush is, many Democrats believe this to be a profound and forceful attack on the war effort.

Biden, Kennedy, Kerry and the rest see public support for the war slipping, and they project their thoughts, hopes, and feelings about the war onto the masses, inevitably concluding that there can only be one reason for such discontent, namely that Americans are simply too emotionally fragile to tolerate any more reports about or footage of dead 18, 19, and 20 year-olds soldiers and Marines. They also conclude that the

public agrees with them that President Bush, not the terrorist “insurgents” who plant the roadside explosive devices and drive the suicide car bombs, is responsible for these deaths. Unnerved by the realities of war, these Democrats blame Bush, promise to end the killing of American soldiers by “setting a timetable,” and presume that a grateful nation will see them as they see themselves, as saviors.

For his part, Hagel's problem is that he subscribes to a vision of America that is even darker and more odious than the Democrats'. Hagel doesn't believe Americans are soft, just selfish and shortsighted. Of course, he doesn't actually think of Americans – or of himself – as selfish, but as “realistic.” The difference, however, appears lost on just about everyone but the Senator. Hagel believes that in attempting to mesh morality with foreign policy, President Bush (and Presidents Clinton, Reagan, and Carter before him) has succumbed to naivety and arrogance and that he has therefore placed American soldiers in harm's way in the pursuit of illusory and immaterial ends.

Hagel fashions himself a realist, but as *The New Republic's* Lawrence Kaplan recently noted, “Hagel's brand of realism derives less from Reinhold Neibuhr than from *Reader's Digest*.” Kaplan also noted that, Hagel's morality-free “realism” has led him to conclude that the Bush administration's hard-line policy toward Iran based on its sponsorship of terrorism is “not helpful;” that “our 40-year policy toward Cuba is senseless;” and that the longstanding American pledge to defend Taiwan is “careless.”

While in Egypt late last week, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice decried “60 years” of American foreign policy in the Middle East that eschewed moral ends, “pursued stability at the expense of democracy,” but “achieved neither.” And yet it is the very policy that produced those 60 years of failure that Hagel and a handful of other post-Reagan “realist” reactionaries (e.g. Rice's old boss Brent Scowcroft) cling to so desperately, apparently persisting in the delusion that the previous 60 years were a mere aberration and that things in the Middle East will turn around eventually if only we maintain the same tired, corrupt status quo.

Hagel, like all men who believe themselves worthy of the title “most powerful man in the world,” is more than a touch self-absorbed. And so like Biden and the Democrats, he sees the flagging poll numbers and takes for granted that they mean that the American people agree with him. In his estimation, the waning of support for the war indicates that the public too has come to believe that it is George Bush’s “moralizing,” not radical Islamists’ “terrorizing,” that is the problem in the world, and that there’s no question that cannot be answered by bringing the boys home, sticking our collective head in the sand, and convincing ourselves that the mass graves, the torture chambers, the weapons of mass destruction, and murderous militants are someone else’s problem.

What appears never to have occurred to Biden and the rest of the dovish Democrats or to Hagel and . . . well . . . to Hagel, is that the American people might not feel exactly as they do about the war, its progress, and President Bush’s role in both; that the public’s hesitancy with regard to the current course in Iraq might be entirely unrelated to the fantasies concocted by these men who believe they could do a much better job of running the world. While Biden believes that Americans are soft and Hagel believes that they are callous, it is much more likely that they are simply impatient.

The American public is, I suspect, anxious to see the bad guys vanquished, agitated that the pace of the war on terror appears to have ground to halt, and annoyed that progress in this stage of the war is measured in increments that are hardly perceptible half-a-world away. Biden and Hagel presume that the bad poll numbers reflect a public that believes the President has been too aggressive in Iraq, yet it is all the more likely, in my estimation, that the people are unhappy with him because he has not been aggressive *enough*.

Lately, a number of supporters of the war have suggested that President Bush’s problem is that he has not fulfilled the principal duty of a wartime president, failing to make the case for the war strongly and repeatedly and thereby failing to keep the public actively engaged. While we are certainly sympathetic

to that charge – one that we ourselves have made at least a half-a-dozen times over the last two years – we’re not sure that’s the issue right now.

The issue, as far as we can tell, is that training the Iraqi military, training Iraqi police officers, rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure, assisting in the drafting of a constitution, building a stable society, and generally helping the Iraqis become part of a functional, self-sufficient nation is not exactly the stuff that they make movies about. Everyone from President Bush to Senator John McCain has warned the American people to expect a “long, hard slog” in Iraq, and what is currently underway over there is precisely that, a long hard slog that is absolutely crucial to the war effort but which is anything but sexy.

Certainly the mainstream media is unmoved by the pace of progress made by the American soldiers and has had to look elsewhere and dig deeper for headline-generating copy. Training cops does not sell papers. And as a result, most media outlets have decided to focus less on the advancement of the war aims and more on the only thing that seems even remotely exciting, which, unfortunately, is the ongoing terrorist insurgency and the occasionally successful attempts by terrorists to blow themselves up close to an American soldier. And this bias in focus, while understandable from the media’s perspective, nevertheless skews the public’s perception of the war and unduly emboldens critics like Biden and Hagel.

For the record, all of this is not to say that the war in Iraq is proceeding flawlessly, rapidly, or without cost. It is not. No one likes to see dead soldiers, and there is no question that every casualty constitutes an enormous personal tragedy. And with hindsight being what it is, mistakes in planning and strategy can clearly be identified. That said, things are almost certainly better than Senator Biden would have us believe and are nowhere near as dire as the defeatist Senator Hagel appears to think.

Many Washington “insiders” believe that President Bush’s toughest challenge over the next year will be keeping renegade legislators like Biden and Hagel

from coming completely unglued, panicking, and threatening the war effort out of sheer hysteria. As *National Review's* Ramesh Ponnuru relayed last week, one top Republican strategist recently lamented, "I'm not too worried about the President's ability to rally the country [on Iraq] if and when he has to. I am worried about his ability to rally the Congress, because it tends to panic."

While there is no question that Congress is overflowing with men and women who tend to react over-emotionally to every little "crisis" (witness the spectacle of two grown, male Senators bawling on the floor of the Senate in the past few weeks), I'm not sure I agree that Congress will be an enormous obstacle to restoring support for the war. Senators in particular may be wobbly-kneed and overly emotive, but they are also slaves to polls, particularly those Senators who fashion themselves "presidential material." And if the public's assessment of the war improves, you can rest assured that many Senators' assessments will as well.

President Bush and his advisors need to be keenly aware of the fact that they have a difficult job to do in restoring the public's confidence in the war effort, but that that task is far from impossible. What they absolutely must realize is that the key to "rescuing" the Iraq effort is not merely to reassure the public that "we are making progress" or that we are "resolute" or that we intend to "stay the course." They need to be able to demonstrate actual tangible progress in disposing of the enemy.

If the President shows up at Fort Bragg tomorrow night and simply runs through the same tired list of platitudes that he offered reporters at his joint press conference with Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari on Friday, then he will almost certainly fail in the first test of his ability to re-convince the public that he and his administration not only know what they are doing, but are, in fact, committed to taking whatever steps are necessary to achieve all of the nation's war objectives.

Where the President is fortunate in this is that he is probably far closer to the truth when he says that the United States is winning and the insurgents are slowly being eradicated than his opponents are when they declare that "we are losing." It would be foolish at this point to declare the war over or to suggest that the terrorists can no longer cause problems, but any objective reading of the situation on the ground in Iraq suggests that the allied forces have the upper hand and should continue to strengthen their position.

More to the point, if he so chooses, the President has the ability both to advance the public relations battle dramatically and to advance the actual war with the insurgency dramatically at the same time.

Many in mainstream press and in the left-leaning "new media" saw special relevance in an exchange that took place at a Senate hearing on Friday between Democrat Carl Levin and Allied Commander, General John Abizaid, in which Levin tried to get Abizaid to contradict Vice President Cheney's recent assessment that the insurgency is "in its last throes." What these media types found so interesting was Abizaid's admission that the "overall strength of the insurgency" is "about the same as it was [six months ago]." But in their rush to play "gotcha" with the Vice President, these intrepid reporters missed the most interesting and telling thing that Abizaid said, which was that "in terms of foreign fighters, I believe there are more foreign fighters coming to Iraq than there were six months ago."

So if the insurgency remains at a constant level but the number of foreign jihadi entering Iraq has increased, that suggests two things. First, it suggests that the *domestic* insurgency is slowly beginning to die down and becoming less relevant. This presumption tends to be confirmed by recent events, including decisions by a number of Sunni leaders to give up their protest and join the political process, and more than a handful of reports detailing so-called "Red on Red" violence, in which domestic and foreign-born insurgents appear to be waging war against one another.

The second thing it suggests is that the Bush administration, or at least the top military brass, now understands that the only way to kill the insurgency and assure victory is to cut off the flow of foreign fighters, which I would guess is bad news for Bashar Assad. Nearly a year ago, in a piece titled “Bush Unbound,” Mark predicted that after he’d won re-election, Bush would turn his attention to the real bad guys in the Iraq conflict, namely the terrorist sponsors and jihad coaches in Iran and Syria. Given General Abizaid’s statement, recent *public* revelations about the training of terrorists inside of Syria, and, most importantly, the warnings issued to Syria late last week by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (“Let’s not have more words about what they can do, let’s have action.”), I suspect that this long-awaited change in tactics is about to become reality, at young Bashar’s expense.

The irony here is that if I am right about this and the President does indeed decide finally to take on the Syrians for their involvement in funding and manning the “insurgency,” the ramifications are likely to be significant, even on the domestic front. For one, Bush will almost certainly push Ted Kennedy and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party right over the edge, forcing them even deeper into the throes of Vietnam obsession syndrome, providing them the opportunity to wax nostalgic about “illegal covert wars,” and bombing in “sovereign neighboring countries.”

Of course, at the same time, he will also be doing something infinitely more important, which is to say that he will be getting aggressive in the war again, or, as Barbara Lerner recently called it, he’ll be bringing back “Cowboy George.” He will be going on the offensive and killing bad guys by (presumably) the hundreds. And this, in turn, will, I believe, bring the public back into the President’s camp, thereby completely baffling the mainstream press, further enraging the truly anti-war minority, and solidifying softening resolve to finish the job.

As for Joe Biden and Chuck Hagel, they will have to re-evaluate their positions on the war and figure out how exactly to frame their opposition and defeatism so as not to look too terribly foolish. And the thing is, they will have to do this whether things turn out well in Iraq or not.

Even if by some wild stretch of the imagination President Bush succumbs to public pressure and “sets a date for withdrawal,” Biden and Hagel will receive precious little credit for doing anything other than contributing to the nation’s humiliation by carping about the war and sapping the will of the nation to fight it. Both men are in no-win positions on the war, and neither is likely to emerge from this mess with presidential aspirations intact. Of course, neither was ever going to be president anyway. They are, in a word, doomed. Or to put it another way, they’re Senators.

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