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THEY SAID IT

The fact that there wasn't a major mass casualty of voters, SBVIED in polling centers or assassinations conducted that the foaming-mouth reporters could get in the middle of just reinforces how far the Iraqi forces have come and how they are getting stronger than the scumbags. Reporters countrywide saturated the area days prior to the elections to hopefully catch the US forces failing. Well too damn bad it didn't happen, so pound sand! . . . I know that if there were an unsuccessful election, it would have been nothing but "Breaking News" shots about how we failed. It's a good day to be an American, stand tall America we helped a country get on its feet today. Semper Fi.

--"Capt. B," Blogger/Marine Captain stationed in Iraq,
October 15, 2005

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WE'RE WINNING.

Over the four-plus years of his presidency, George W. Bush's stubbornness has become almost legendary. The obstinacy that he reportedly inherited from his mother has, indeed, become one of his most defining characteristics. And while conservatives have spent the past couple weeks bemoaning this, knowing full well that it means that the President is exceptionally unlikely to withdraw the nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, no matter how loudly they howl in protest, their distress should be tempered by the knowledge that this stubbornness has not been entirely destructive and has, in fact, been one of the most comforting aspects of the war in Iraq.

Now, I know that some – yours truly included – have argued that the President's stubbornness has at times been a serious problem in the conduct of the war, since he has, for the most part, ignored repeated pleas to "sell" the war to the American people aggressively, and has thereby allowed public opinion of the effort to sink to dangerous and unwarranted lows.

That said, the very fact that President Bush is so impervious to criticism and so unwilling to flinch once his mind is made up has provided desperately needed consistency to the conduct of foreign policy. In addition, it has reassured supporters, critics, allies, and, most importantly, the enemy that the United States will not shirk its obligations or renege on its promises, and will not allow this war to become a replay of Vietnam, as so many foes, both at home and abroad, hope.

The good news here is that after what was a long, hot, seemingly unending, dreadful, summer for most of the President's supporters, things appear to be turning around, at least regarding Iraq. The President's stubbornness and unwillingness to veer from the course he's charted, even in the face of withering domestic criticism, appears to be paying off. Though you'd never know it from reading the mainstream press or watching the network newscasts, the United States is winning in Iraq, and this reality is growing more and more undeniable to all but a handful of domestic critics who are themselves shockingly stubborn and unwilling even to entertain the possibility that perhaps the President has been right all along.

You don't have to take my word for it, you know. As it turns out, there are plenty of people in the world who agree that the "insurgency" is not going particularly well and that the controversial democratization project in Iraq appears right on track. For starters, on Saturday, more than ten million Iraqis confirmed their belief in democracy and their correlated belief that the insurgency is increasingly impotent. Though some of the most strident mavens of yesteryear media (e.g. *The New York Times*) are insisting that the turnout for the weekend's constitutional referendum was "mixed," reports from Iraq (and from less ideologically motivated news sources) suggest not only that *more* people turned out for this vote than for the much-heralded provisional election last January, but that they did so much more securely. More than 40 Iraqis died in 347 election-day attacks last winter, while only 10 died in 13 attacks on Saturday. This was not perfect, of course, but it was much improved, to say the least.

Of all the Iraqis who participated, it looks now as if the Sunnis were the most enthusiastic. It is impressive that the referendum came off without a mass casualty incident and produced heavy voter turnout. It is phenomenal that the heaviest turnout was likely in the Sunni regions – including nearly 80% in Saddam's hometown of Tikrit – where most of the "smart" Western observers had predicted that little would happen.

The Sunnis have been left out of the process, we were told by the so-called experts; they'll never participate; in their eyes the entire electoral process is illegitimate, blah, blah, blah. And as usual, every bit of this was wrong. The Sunnis participated heavily. And while they may not support the new government or the new constitution with burning democratic fervor, clearly they felt safe enough to vote and felt that the process was too important to ignore. And that is progress, by almost any definition.

Among others who appear to believe that the good guys are winning is none other than al Qaeda's number-two guy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is so certain that the insurgency is failing that he felt it necessary to send a letter to Iraq's al Qaeda franchisee Abu Musab al-Zarqawi imploring him to change tactics and to please, please, please stop making the terrorist organization appear so, well, terroristic.

The full, translated text of the intercepted letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi was released by the Bush administration last week, and it revealed a dispirited, downtrodden, and desperate al Qaeda that believes not only that the tactics employed by Michael Moore's Iraqi "minutemen" and "freedom fighters" are losing the ground war in Iraq but are alienating Muslims worldwide. As it turns out, nasty old George Bush isn't losing the battle for the "hearts and minds" of the Muslim world; al Qaeda and Zarqawi are. As Zawahiri himself put it:

[M]any of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques . . . My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue.

And if the attacks on Shia leaders were necessary to put a stop to their plans, then why were there attacks on ordinary Shia? Won't this lead to reinforcing false ideas in their minds, even as it is incumbent on us to preach the call of Islam to them and explain

and communicate to guide them to the truth? And can the mujahedeen kill all of the Shia in Iraq? Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that? . . .

Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable -also- are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughterers, etc. They do not express the general view of the admirer and the supporter of the resistance in Iraq, and of you in particular by the favor and blessing of God.

Finally, lest you think that only Sunni terrorists are unhappy at the way things are turning out in Iraq, there are also reports that the Mad Mullahs in Tehran and some of their supporters are also dejected by the course of recent events and lament the fact that their attempts to influence Arab Shi'ites in Iraq have been less than successful.

According to the folks at "Regime Change Iran," on Friday "a [Iranian] regime-run web site admits to the regime's defeat in soliciting support from Arabs." Iran Press News reported that the regime-run web site "explicitly demanded that the Islamic Republic cease and desist from further meddling in the internal issues of Iraq and wrote: "To establish our aims in Iraq is a very difficult and labor-intensive process; we should not act in a way such that in a few years from now we would end up regretting those choices and be left wondering how we lost Iraq as well."

Now, I know that a great many domestic analysts and observers still insist that the war is going poorly and that Bush has, ala LBJ, gotten the country bogged down in a quagmire from which it will be unable to escape with its dignity intact. It is important to remember when listening to or reading such critiques that while the critics want you to believe them to be impartial, they are not. For a variety of reasons, they have a stake in the outcome of Iraq that differs from the stake the nation has.

Some, like Al Gore, John Kerry, Howard Dean, and virtually every other prominent national figure in the Democratic Party (with a couple of key exceptions, of course) have allowed their hatred of the President to so dominate them that they have tied their personal political fortunes to his, meaning that they benefit only when he fails. And in this case, that means that they benefit only when things appear to be going badly in Iraq. I don't actually believe that any of these people actively or consciously hopes for the enemy to win in Iraq, but each one's obsession with the President and with opposing him at every turn, regardless of the propriety of such resistance, has made him or her a *de facto* enemy sympathizer and therefore someone likely to put the worst possible spin on any episode related to the war.

Others have a significant personal intellectual stake in the outcome of the war, having spent their entire careers tied to and advocating ideas that will be directly contradicted if Iraq turns out well and if President Bush's rejection of the status quo approach to Middle East affairs is thereby vindicated. These folks, who number both Republicans and Democrats, are former National Security Advisors, intelligence officials, and State Department grandees, all of whom expect Bush to fail because he and his advisors are trying to do things that they believe are stupid or naïve; and if Bush succeeds, then the stupidity and naivety would, to coin a really incredibly awkward phrase, be on the other foot.

Last Sunday, for example, an article about Iraq by former Carter National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. It was titled "American Debacle," and argued that the war in Iraq was, well, an American debacle. Brzezinski wrote:

Some 60 years ago Arnold Toynbee concluded, in his monumental "Study of History," that the ultimate cause of imperial collapse was "suicidal statecraft." Sadly for George W. Bush's place in history and — much more important — ominously for America's future, that adroit phrase increasingly seems applicable to the policies pursued by the United States since the cataclysm of 9/11.

Of course, as classics professor and sometimes Cheney advisor Victor Davis Hanson noted in response, if anyone in the world is qualified to write about American debacles, it's old Zbig, who, along with his boss, managed more than his fair share of them. Hanson put it thusly:

[T]hat such criticism comes from a high official of an administration that witnessed on its watch the Iranian-hostage debacle, the disastrous rescue mission, the tragicomic odyssey of the terminally ill shah, the first and last Western Olympic boycott, oil hikes even higher in real dollars than the present spikes, Communist infiltration into Central America, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Cambodian holocaust, a gloomy acceptance that perpetual parity with the Soviet Union was the hope of the day, the realism that cemented our ties with corrupt autocracies in the Middle East (Orwellian sales of F-15 warplanes to the Saudis minus their extras), and the hard-to-achieve simultaneous high unemployment, high inflation, and high interest rates, Mr. Brzezinski is at least a valuable barometer of the current pessimism over events such as September 11.

Why anyone in the world would care what Brzezinski has to say about the current state of American foreign policy is beyond me. A more pathetic and irresolute foreign policy than that which he helped craft and implement is frankly unimaginable. Yet here he is prominently placed on the op-ed page of one of the nation's largest newspapers pontificating away, as if he has even a shred of credibility on the matter or as if anyone outside of his immediate family cares about his "expert" opinion.

If anything, the fact that the likes of Brzezinski, Madeleine Albright, Brent Scowcroft, and the rest of the establishment foreign policy mavens oppose the course of action adopted by the Bush administration in the Middle East and believe that the war is a "debacle" serves simply to further bolster the contention that the United States is actually

winning the war. Brzezinski et al. have been hopelessly confused and painfully wrong about all things Middle Eastern for decades. Why should now be any different?

All of this is not to say that everything is perfect in Iraq right now or is going to turn out perfectly. But it is to say that it looks more and more as if America is slowly but surely winning. Domestic critics will never concede as much, but both they and the openly anti-war mainstream media are quite likely to be overtaken by developments on the ground. The fact of the matter is that three years into the war on terror, the United States has still lost fewer than 2,000 soldiers, has displaced two volatile, openly aggressive authoritarian regimes, and has made considerable progress in establishing reasonable and reasonably stable constitutional governments to replace the deposed dictators.

In Iraq, a new constitution has likely just been approved by popular vote; the new military continues to grow in both size and proficiency; the vast majority of the country is beginning to resume normal commercial and industrial activity (including producing oil); and, most importantly, the "insurgency" is growing more unpopular and more desperate.

There will be hard times ahead, of course, and it is still highly questionable whether Iraq will ever be a functional democracy as the West has come to understand the term. But on the whole, conditions are improving and the shrieks of "quagmire" and "debacle" appear further and further removed from reality. As the editors of *The New York Sun* put it this morning, "Mistakes can still be made, and success is not yet guaranteed, but it's looking better every day."

If they (and we) are right about this, then several political dynamics are likely to change significantly as a result. For starters, President Bush will, naturally, be buoyed by this success in his most important presidential endeavor and will thereby regain some of the political clout he has lost over the last several months.

Don't expect this to happen immediately, however, since the next couple weeks are going to be rough on the administration, regardless of what happens in Iraq. Between the Miers nomination and the possibility that one or more high-level administration officials may be indicted by the special prosecutor investigating the Valerie Plame/Joseph Wilson case, the White House will continue to struggle for the next several weeks. But ultimately this presidency will be judged on the success of the Iraq operation, and if things continue to progress there, then the President will, in short order, regain his footing.

On the domestic front, it is doubtful that the President's resurgence will come in time to bring his fellow Republicans any great fortune in next year's midterm elections. But it should certainly squelch most of the more farfetched forecasts of a Democratic takeover. The President's low poll numbers, which have scared a number of potential GOP candidates out of what might otherwise have been competitive races, will slowly rise. By next November, the generic ballot question will show a pretty even split between Republicans and Democrats, and the midterm election will reflect that, with neither party making much headway. The great Democratic takeover of '06 is unlikely to take place in any case, in my opinion, and is even far more unlikely if things continue to go well in Iraq.

Of course, the more significant implications of improving conditions in Iraq involve the President's ability to move aggressively on foreign policy and restart the broader war on terror. Now Mark and I have been wrong more times than either of us care to count in predicting that President Bush will get more aggressive in extra-Iraq arenas of the war. As such, we are hesitant to make yet another prediction along those lines, but I can't help but believe that this time things will be different.

Syria's mini-Assad dictator, who has been a serious fly in the Iraq-war ointment, now appears to be on increasingly shaky footing with his own countrymen. Failure to seize the opportunities presented by

Assad's precarious position would be devastating, and therefore American-led activity along the Syrian-Iraq border (preferably on the Syrian side) should almost certainly increase.

Additionally, it appears more and more likely that the Mad Mullahs in Tehran and their newly elected terrorist-President will force a confrontation with someone over their nuclear weapons program. If President Bush is smart, he will make sure that that someone is the United States, rather than the other potential player in this drama, Israel.

For obvious reasons – including its proximity to Iran and the Iranian regime's rabid anti-Semitism – Israel has a more immediate and more warranted stake in preventing the Iranian regime from finalizing its plans to acquire nuclear weapons. I think it likely that Saudi reports that Prime Minister Sharon has warned President Bush that he will take out the Iranian nukes if he has to are just more of the usual anti-Semitic con Spiro-fantasies concocted by regime-controlled Arab media. That said, Sharon is a serious and smart man and therefore understands the threat that Iranian nukes present not only to his country but to the world. If President Bush is equally serious and smart, he will do whatever is necessary to ensure that Israel is protected and that she isn't forced to start a regional war by defending herself against the anti-Semitic Islamic Republic.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the underreported events in Russia this past week underscore the importance of aggressively pursuing the war on terror on all fronts. As the inimitable Mark Steyn noted, "the carnage they [Chechen Islamists] wreaked in the hitherto semi-safe-ish republic of Kabardino-Balkaria suggests that they're more likely to spread the conflict to other parts of the Russian Federation than Moscow is to contain it."

This means that Islamic terrorists – aside from the terrorist regime in Iran – may soon have access to nuclear weapons or, at the very least, nuclear materials for the construction of a dirty bomb. Though the

remnants of al-Qaeda lie in ruins in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Islamo-fascist war on the non-Muslim world continues and continues to grow more and more serious.

Fortunately, it appears that the good guys are winning the battle for Iraq, which is the principal front in this war. In the short-to-medium term, that should free up resources to aid on the war's other fronts. In the long run, that means that the region that spawned this deadly ideology may yet be reformed and become more peaceable, if not truly democratic. I know that that sounds a little hokey and far-fetched right now, but a couple of months ago it seemed equally far-fetched that the United States would win the war in Iraq. Yet today, Iraq is well on its way to adopting a new constitution and forming a new, representative government. In other words, as the headline to this peace proclaims, we're winning in Iraq, and that gives at least some reason to hope that we can win elsewhere as well.

A FAIRER, BETTER TAX CODE? DREAM ON.

I had, quite blessedly, forgotten that there was such a thing as a "President's Advisory Panel on Tax Reform" until I opened the paper last week and discovered that the members of this esteemed group have preliminarily agreed, after almost a year's study, that the best way to reform the existing tax system is to limit the tax break on home ownership and on employer-paid health insurance as a means of eliminating the alternative minimum tax. This latter nightmare was part of the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982, which was the first tax increase enacted after the first Reagan tax cuts in 1981. It was agreed to by President Reagan only in response to a promise that Congress would reduce spending by \$3 for every \$1 increase in taxes, which, of course, never happened. And so it goes.

Now I have no idea how much America's taxpayers have spent on this panel so far, but if it has exceeded the cost of a cup of coffee at a Salvation Army shelter for the homeless it is too much. Last May the members of this panel issued a formal statement announcing that their preliminary assessment of the task that lay ahead of them was that "America needs a better tax system." The current one had become, they said, "a headache of burdensome record-keeping, lengthy instructions, and complicated schedules, worksheets, and forms – often requiring multiple computations that are neither logical nor intuitive." Then they added the following additional insight.

Not only is our tax system maddeningly complex, it penalizes work, discourages saving and investment, and hinders the competitiveness of American businesses. The tax code is riddled with tax provisions that treat similarly situated taxpayers differently and create perceptions of unfairness.

Setting aside the fact that a high school sophomore of average intelligence from a middle-income family could have arrived at the same conclusions after a short, dinner conversation with his or her father or mother, this was nevertheless not a terrible start. All ventures must begin somewhere and kicking this one off with a series of clichés, truisms, chestnuts, platitudes, bromides, and banalities would have been as good a place as any if the subsequent steps had been taken with wisdom and an eye toward the ultimate goal as outlined in the Executive Order establishing the panel, the principle provision of which was to create some suggestions for making the tax laws simpler and more conducive to economic growth and efficiency.

But, of course, nothing like that happened. Not only would the two proposals that were made public last week fail to make the tax code any more simple or economically efficient, but neither has a chance in hell of becoming law in the near or even the distant future. If this is the panel's best shot, it was a colossal waste of time and money.

In fact, the “President’s Advisory Panel on Tax Reform” would have been better off, in my opinion, to have proposed a plan that is outlined on a t-shirt someone gave me as a gift several years ago. The shirt displays a “Liberal Tax Form” with just two lines: the first being, “How much money did you make last year? And the second saying, “Send it in.” At least America’s taxpayers would have gotten a chuckle for the money they spent on this stupid panel.

In my opinion, if the President had been serious about making the tax code less complex, burdensome, time consuming, and damaging to the economy, and he wanted to begin the process with a presidential advisory panel, he should have created a panel to study why the current system is the way it is, or to put this another way, how we got into this mess in the first place.

Armed with this esoteric knowledge, he would then, I believe, understand why all prior schemes to reform the system had failed and could then make an informed judgment as to whether it was worthwhile to continue to try. My guess is that he would abandon the effort in favor of something more simple and achievable, like perhaps keeping the earth’s temperature within a narrow range that has been scientifically established to assure worldwide climatic excellence.

Why would he likely abandon the effort? Because he would find that the tax code is the way it is for the same reason that a duck-billed platypus is the way it is, i.e., because each aspect of the whole, even those components that appear to be ridiculous, was placed there by its creator to serve an important purpose for the functioning of the whole. The beast may not appear, at first glance, to have been intelligently designed, but upon inspection one finds that it was constructed in perfect accordance with the purpose for which its creator intended it.

Like the duck-billed platypus, the tax code is the result of a long period of evolution. Unlike the duck-billed platypus, many hands have been involved in the evolution of the tax code and it is still evolving. But just as the duck-billed platypus was not designed to

climb trees or fly, the tax code has not been designed to be either simple or economically efficient. Indeed, none of the creators of the tax code, since it sprang into life late in the 19th century, have ever given a tinker’s damn about whether it caused grief to either the taxpayer or the economy.

Congress passed the first federal income tax in 1862 to pay for the on-going Civil War. President Grant suspended it seven years after the war ended. In 1894 Congress did it again, under the administration of Grover Cleveland. Not surprisingly, he was a Democrat. In fact, he was the first Democrat elected after the end of the war. But the Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional the very next year in the famous case of *Pollock V. Farmers Loan & Trust Co.* The formal decision was made on technical grounds, but the true objection was that its was a graduated tax, which violated the “uniformity” requirement of the constitution by exempting some citizens from the tax altogether and by taxing some at higher levels than others.

Reflecting the views and concerns of the founding fathers, Justice Field, writing for the majority, argued that “every citizen should contribute his proportion, however small the sum, to the support of the government, and it is no kindness to urge any of our citizens to escape this obligation.”

This, of course, did not put the matter to rest, but simply stirred the populist tax advocates to greater frenzy, and in 1913, in the final days of the Taft administration, the 16th amendment to the Constitution was ratified. This was the result of a poorly designed and implemented Republican scheme to kill a Democratic tax bill by demanding that an income tax could only be done via a constitutional amendment.

To everyone’s surprise, the amendment passed, largely due to overwhelming public support based on the slogan “soak the rich,” who numbered among their ranks the Rockefellers, the Morgans and the Carnegies. Of course, the “rich” didn’t get soaked. They set up “charitable foundations,” recently designed and approved for the specific purpose of protecting their

money from the tax collector, and the poor middle class saps who wanted to soak the rich have been wet ever since.

The 16th Amendment, by the way, formally put to rest the Constitution's "uniformity" requirement on which the founding fathers had placed so much faith. No longer did the government need to be "uniform" in its taxation, or even fair. Indeed, from that point on the majority ruled when it came to taxation. In case you haven't read it lately it goes as follows.

"The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes on incomes, from whatever source derived, without apportionment among the several states, and without regard to any census of enumeration."

Now I am no tax law historian, but there doesn't appear to have been any thought given in any of the above-mentioned proceedings to making the tax code either simple or economically efficient. Initially, the two most important considerations were that the law raised money for the federal government and that it passed muster constitutionally.

Since that fateful episode in the nation's history, the tax law has, as the newly enlightened members of the above-referenced panel discovered, grown in complexity and become an increasing burden to the economy. Naturally, this has created a certain amount of complaining from the general public, from the nation's business community, and from economists. But, once again, it is worth noting that none of this background noise has ever made any difference whatsoever to the tax code creators, i.e., those who "represent the interests of the people," a.k.a. the politicians.

Why? Because over the years the politicians have increasingly grown to view the tax code as a vehicle for launching massive social engineering projects

and for rewarding and penalizing both individuals and specific classes of individuals. They are no more concerned about the simplicity or economic efficiency of the tax code than a breeder of toy poodles is about the fact that these dogs could not hold their own in a fight with a pit bull.

In fact, the tax code is the most powerful weapon known to American politicians and they are not about to give it up or to water it down in deference to pleas for either greater simplicity or economic efficiency. As it is, the tax code is more powerful than the budget process. It can be used to affect everything from visionary social changes to the attitudes and contributory inclinations of individuals and corporations alike.

Entire industries can be favored or destroyed. Trucking companies can gain a huge advantage over rails; farmers can be bankrupt or propped up; manufacturers can be crushed or subsidized; the rust belt can be given a boost or relegated to the dustbin of history; internet commerce can be penalized or promoted. Warren Buffet and Bill Gates can be made richer or poorer by a stroke of the pen.

Could the tax code ever be simplified and rendered more sympathetic to economic growth and prosperity? Well maybe, in response to some great economic crisis, perhaps. But for the foreseeable future, it seems extremely unlikely.

The tax code is the lifeblood of today's politicians, their rod and their staff. A gang of dopey politicians at the turn of the 19th century bequeathed it to them as Prometheus gave fire to mankind, a gift of immense force, capable of raising primitive mortals from the darkness of the caves. They will fight tooth and nail not to give it up. Could the code be made simpler or more efficient and still retain its enormous power? Could fire be rendered free from danger?

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