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THEY SAID IT

Last week, the Republican majority, to their disgrace and with 13 honorable exceptions, passed an amendment calling on the administration to lay out its “plan” for “ending” the war and withdrawing U.S. troops. They effectively signed on to the Democrat framing of the debate: that the only thing that matters is the so-called exit strategy. The only difference between Bill Frist’s mushy Republicans and Harry Reid’s shameless Democrats is that the latter want to put a firm date on withdrawal, so that Zarqawi’s insurgents can schedule an especially big car bomb to coincide with the formal handover of the Great Satan’s cojones.

--Mark Steyn, “Senate Adopts ‘Exit Strategy’ from Reality,”
Chicago Sun-Times, November 20, 2005.

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IRAQ: NO EXIT.

Last June, I wrote an article entitled “A Touch of Optimism on Iraq,” in which I noted that the principal difference between the anti-war movement during the Vietnam days and the anti-war movement today is that “so far at least, no national political figure has publicly supported immediate withdrawal or openly cheered for the enemy to win.”

I observed that while critics of the war in Iraq complain a great deal, “as a practical matter, their carping is not a threat to Bush’s long-term war effort since it is not organized and has no discernible goal around which antagonistic Americans can unite.”

Last week, this situation changed when Democratic Congressman John Murtha (Pa.) publicly called for what amounts to an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. And while he did not openly cheer for the enemy to win, his remarks could hardly be viewed by the bad guys as anything but a sign that they are making headway in their strategy of winning the war in Iraq on the streets of America, as indeed they are.

There is, of course, no danger that Murtha’s proposal is going to spark an instant groundswell of support among his fellow Democrats for an immediate pullout. As the *Washington Post* put it shortly after Murtha made his remarks, “Democrats ran for cover.” And then when a measure was brought to the floor of the House on Friday night calling for an immediate withdrawal, it was defeated by a vote of 403 to 3 with six others voting “present.” Even Murtha voted against the measure.

Nevertheless, Murtha’s emphatic statement earlier in the week that “it’s time to bring [the troops] home” is a very troubling development for the White House. Coming as it does from a respected, hawkish Democrat with solid ties to the military, Murtha’s claim that the “time has come” provides what is arguably the first truly

respectable foundation on which a “get-out-now” movement can begin to build. Cindy Sheehan, who lost a son in Iraq, had managed to form a small “get out now” movement last summer, but the people who were involved in her campaign were a disreputable lot and the decidedly anti-American language they used was not conducive to building a large following of respectable politicians and ordinary Americans.

Of course, the Murtha movement could fade into the fifteen minutes of fame category if the war news improves and the White House does a better job of building public support for the effort. But it could also quite rapidly increase in size and importance if the war news were to take a bad turn between now and the election next year.

But as the expression goes, it is an ill wind that blows no good, and this is certainly true with the Murtha development. For one thing, by placing the issue of withdrawal firmly on the table, Murtha may have changed the on-going dialogue between antiwar Democrats and the White House from the integrity of the President’s justification for going to war to whether the United States should stay there now that it is there. From a political standpoint, this would be a big improvement for the White House.

More importantly, Murtha has made it virtually mandatory now that any politician who is discussing the various options available to the United States in Iraq must address the withdrawal option and in doing so must discuss the ramifications of such a withdrawal.

It is one thing to blithely announce, as Murtha did, that “it’s time to bring the troops home,” but it is quite another to respond thoughtfully to questions concerning the consequences of such an action. Would it be damaging to the long-term security of the United States and its assets abroad? Would it be damaging to the security of other nations in the Middle East, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel? Is there a chance that the United States would have to launch another full-scale military invasion of Iraq if Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were to take over the government there? If the United States were to abandon the Bush policy of taking the war

to the enemy, would the enemy take the war to the United States? If the going gets tough in Afghanistan, should the United States leave there also? Since other nations are involved in the Iraqi effort, should they be consulted? For example, does it matter what the United Kingdom thinks? And how about Pakistan?

Indeed, as far as I can see, these questions and the answers they beg are the only substantial thing standing between America’s continued troop involvement in Iraq and widespread, bi-partisan support for Murtha’s proposed pullout. Theoretically, President Bush’s determination to build a democracy in Iraq is another argument for staying, but in my opinion neither Congress nor the American public have ever cared very much whether Iraq becomes a democracy or not.

In fact, I have believed from the very beginning that it is a serious mistake for President Bush to persist in maintaining that the democratization of Iraq is a primary justification for the war there. Indeed, I think this strategy is largely responsible for the waning public support for the effort. In my opinion, the war can only be sold to a broad section of the American public by convincing them that they, their families, their loved ones, and their country are all safer as a direct result of the war. I made this point two years ago in an article entitled “How Bush Could Lose the War Iraq.”

When, following the September 11 attacks, Bush claimed that America must launch a ground war in Afghanistan in order to be safe from future attacks by Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network, Americans collectively said, “Go for it,” despite the possibility of thousands of casualties. Then later, when President Bush claimed that Saddam Hussein directly threatened the security of the United States because he had weapons of mass destruction, Americans once again wholeheartedly supported the effort to destroy him and his government, even if, as some folks claimed at the time, casualties might number in the thousands, and might involve horrible deaths caused by chemical and biological weapons.

When it became apparent after the ground action ceased in Iraq that Saddam had not been as great a threat to U.S. security as the President had maintained, Americans didn't like it. But, since casualties had been relatively low, they were mostly willing to take credit for having done a grand and noble thing by ridding the Iraqis of an evil dictator. And the Bush crowd breathed a sigh of relief and began talking up this wonderful humanitarian action they had accomplished.

But then, when casualties began to mount again, the Bush folks began trying to justify the continued loss of American lives by citing the humanitarian effort, and they found, much to their chagrin, that this is a losing proposition. It can't be sustained. Giving money to make other people happy is fine. Sacrificing American lives to make other people happy just doesn't cut it. So the task ahead for the Bush administration, as I see it, involves convincing the American people once again that the battle over Iraq is directly — very directly — linked to American security. The argument that the enemy over there killed 20 American soldiers but that that is okay because the Iraqi people now have more electricity than they had when Saddam was running the place simply won't sell. In fact, it's an insult. I believe it is safe to say that the vast majority of Americans don't give a damn whether the Iraqi people have electricity, or even candles for that matter, if the cost of providing them with this luxury is the life of a single American soldier.

To put this another way, I think the Bush administration will lose the war for the hearts and minds of the public unless it stops measuring "success" in Iraq by how many amenities we have been able to provide the Iraqis . . .

My advice to the Bush White House if I were asked, which I won't be, would be to . . . reestablish the direct link between the American military presence in Iraq and the goal of destroying a dangerous enemy. If the link is real, then Americans will understand and support the effort. If it is illusionary, or casual at best, then it is probably time to leave anyway.

Of course, the White House crowd didn't ask me and they didn't figure it out on their own. Consequently, they have merrily gone about selling the war on the basis of the glories of democracy rather than convincing the public that there is an important link between a secure Iraq and a secure United States. Not surprisingly, public support for the war has declined steadily. And this drop has made the White House more vulnerable to charges that it took America into the war on false pretenses than it would be if public support for the war were still strong.

This situation is politically awful for the Republicans and for the White House. But it has little or nothing to do with the question of whether and when to bring the troops home.

As I indicated earlier, this issue is a function of the undeniable, geopolitical problems that would result from a precipitous pull out. Without realizing it, President Bush has mimicked one of the military strategies of the great generals of the Roman Empire including, the story goes, Julius Caesar, i.e., burning their ships behind them in order to block off any thought of retreat by their troops.

In the near term, this accidental no-possibility-of-retreat strategy has put the anti-war Democrats in a very difficult position, as was evident during the vote in the House last Friday night. As for President Bush, it does for him what it did for the Roman generals. It assures that the battle will continue regardless of how well it is being waged. And the American public? Well they are in the same position as the Roman troops were who watched the ships behind them being torched. They wonder how they got into this mess and how they are going to get out of it.

THE BUSH-MCCAIN AXIS.

There is little question that when the history of the Bush presidency is written, the third week in November 2005 will play a crucial role in the narrative. In my estimation, last week was enormously significant, producing watershed events that may well affect not only the course of the remainder of this presidential term but quite possibly that of the next one as well.

Now, for the record, when I refer to “watershed events” I *do not* have in mind Congressman John Murtha’s “stunning” repudiation of the Iraq war and his “heartfelt” call for immediate withdrawal of American troops from that country. While I don’t doubt Murtha’s sincerity and certainly agree that he cannot be easily dismissed as just another “loony leftist,” I still don’t think his comments merited anywhere near the amount of attention they received. Sure, Murtha is generally considered a hawk, but so what? He’s been against this war since before it began; he’s has been calling for the removal of troops since before they’d even had time to set up their tents; and he began publicly referring to the war as “unwinnable” well over a year ago. How, one has to wonder, does his latest rendition of the same old song constitute news?

More to the point, I can’t shake the feeling that Murtha’s declaration of surrender was just a little too scripted. Not that I think Murtha knowingly took part in a charade, mind you; it’s just that the prominence and exposure given to his pronouncement by party officials and their contacts in the media are suggestive to me of a broader political assault, a strategic offensive on the part of the small handful of wily political operatives left in the Democratic Party to try to minimize the damage that could be done to them and to their political ambitions if President Bush and his defenders turn out to be right about Iraq.

You see, there have been reports circulating for the last couple weeks – citing everyone from “unnamed Pentagon sources” to the President of Iraq himself – indicating that the Iraqi security forces are getting up to speed much more quickly than was anticipated and that the length of the American troops’ stay in

Iraq might therefore be much shorter than is currently believed. And while I certainly don’t think there’s any reason to go buying any “Welcome home, boys” banners yet, I know the news from Iraq is better than the media pretends it is, and I know as well that any potential good news from Iraq scares the devil out of Congressional Democrats. Whatever his other problems, if President Bush could begin to bring troops home sooner than expected with at least the semblance of victory, his presidency would be saved and the Democratic plans to retake power by denigrating the war would be thwarted.

Given all of this, Murtha’s remarks and, I guess more specifically, the importance attached to them by his fellow Democrats and their compliant devotees in the mainstream press, just struck me as overly purposeful, intended to blunt any potential upside of developments in Iraq for the President. And I was not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only one who suspected such an ulterior motive. Liberal blogger Mickey Kaus, among others, agreed that the Congressman’s comments and the related hype seemed a little staged. He summed up his thoughts thusly:

Someone who works for Ralph Nader once described to me a brilliant technique of his: When he heard a rumor that the government was about to do something, he immediately called a press conference and demanded that it be done. Is that what Rep. Murtha has now done? Just askin’ . . .

Unfortunaely, for the Democrats and for the soldiers in Iraq and their families (and, frankly, for most Americans), this strategy is not likely to be terribly helpful, since there is a chance that it will compel President Bush and his political advisors (e.g. Karl “the Dark Lord” Rove) to rethink what they had planned to do next, whatever that may have been. As Kaus continued (bold in original):

Nader’s press conferences would arguably have had the effect of delaying the government’s impending action, because who wants to seem to be taking orders from Nader? Murtha’s move may have the

same effect, for a slightly different reason: **Murtha has now established exactly the worst context for a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.** By making his (understandable) teary concern about the injuries to our soldiers his central motivation, he makes it seem, if we pull out now, that the Sunni/Zarqawi strategy has worked--that we've been run out of Iraq because we couldn't tolerate the casualties the insurgents were inflicting. That will encourage Al Qaeda operatives around the globe. Isn't it a lot better if we start to withdraw, after a successful Iraqi election, while plausibly claiming that we've done our job? That's why Hastert's stunt yesterday to put down Murtha's proposal was amply justified. It makes it easier to withdraw if it doesn't seem to be a response to Murtha's cry of pain.

All things considered, then, I don't find the argument that Congressman Murtha's comments were momentous particularly convincing. But if Murtha's outburst wasn't the "watershed" development I had in mind, then what was?

In my opinion, the truly important development of the week was a decision made by the overwhelming majority of the Senate's Republican caucus to put their personal political well being ahead of the well being of the nation and thereby to approve an amendment to the defense appropriations bill calling on President Bush to make 2006 "a period of significant transition to full Iraqi sovereignty," in order to enable "the phased redeployment of United States forces from Iraq."

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and amendment co-sponsor John Warner (of Virginia, much to my embarrassment) insisted that their amendment was a necessary and reasonable alternative to a Democratic amendment that would have established specific and arbitrary deadlines for troop withdrawal. But in truth, the Republican plan was neither necessary nor an alternative.

Late in the week, the conservative media watchdog Media Matters complained that NBC's *Today Show* got confused about which amendment was which and "presented as a Republican initiative a plan first proposed by Senate Democrats that would require regular reporting by the Bush administration to Congress on progress in withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq." While I'm not usually one to cut the appallingly vapid Katie Couric any breaks, in this case, she can be forgiven, since the actual Republican "plan" was one that even seasoned Washington pros had a difficult time distinguishing from the Democratic version. Media Matters described the GOP amendment as "in most respects the same as the Democrats' amendment," but that really doesn't do the GOP capitulation justice.

What Frist and Warner actually did was to take the Democrats' amendment; cross out the names of the original co-sponsors, a virtual who's who of the liberal establishment (including Carl Levin, Ted Kennedy, Harry Reid, Joseph Biden, John Kerry, Diane Feinstein, Chris Dodd, and Russell Feingold); replace them with their own names; cross out about six other lines of text, and resubmit it for Senate approval. By his actions, Frist reinforced his image, well earned over years of actively avoiding anything even remotely resembling political confrontation, as a limp-wristed political opportunist. And by his, Warner reinforced his image, perhaps best exemplified by the fact that he, like dozens of other desperate publicity seekers over the years, was briefly married to Elizabeth Taylor, as a man concerned almost exclusively with locating the nearest camera and doing his best, most sincere impression of a "statesman."

In voting the way they did, Republican Senators sent several clear messages to President Bush and to the country. The majority of the caucus – 41 Senators to be exact – sent the message that they really are as devoid of principles as many of us had long suspected, no more willing to take a consistent stand than the Democrats who voted for the war three years ago but now insist they were duped. The Republicans declared for the entire world to see that they are scared; that they are worried more about their political

futures than about the outcome of the war, and are concerned more about slipping public opinion than about doing the right thing. In essence, what they told President Bush is “when the going gets tough, you’re on your own, pal.”

The rest of the caucus – 13 Senators in all – sent the opposite message, signaling that they not only support the mission in Iraq but that they are unafraid to defend it and to suffer the political fallout that may ensue if things get hairy.

While all of this might seem like especially bad news for the President – what with the members of his own party voting better than three-to-one to kick him when he’s down – in the long run, I suspect that it is better for Bush that this vote was held than if it weren’t. If nothing else, the President now knows unequivocally who his (and the troops’) actual supporters are and who is instead motivated principally by self interest and self preservation. Given the tenor of the public debate and the seriousness of the times, I suspect that it will be helpful to the President to know if he ever needs any help from the guys on Capitol Hill that Frist, for example, or George Allen, or Rick Santorum is unlikely to be a terribly reliable ally and is instead more likely to be wrapped up in “maintaining his political viability within the system” (to borrow a phrase from Bill Clinton).

It should also help President Bush to know that for better or for worse his fortunes probably now depend quite heavily on the continued support of one of the 13 who voted against the Frist-Warner amendment, the one Senator who is probably more important – at least in terms of influence with the public and with the media – than the 41 who voted the other way combined. I am referring, of course, to John McCain, who has long been the darling of the media and “centrists,” but who has now made himself completely indispensable to President Bush as well.

Among the consequences of last week’s Senate vote, therefore, is likely to be a greater reliance by the administration on the assets brought to the political debate by Senator McCain. Though Bush and McCain

have had their problems over the years, and though McCain has been a persistent thorn in the side of the conservatives who have, until recently, been the President’s most loyal supporters, Bush simply needs McCain now (and for the foreseeable future) and therefore must rely on him to continue to be the most eloquent and effective defender of the war in Iraq and the broader war on terror.

If you’re looking for the ultimate upshot of last week’s Senate vote, then, I believe that it will be John McCain’s emergence as the long-awaited unofficial heir apparent to the Bush presidency. With Dick Cheney having declared his firm intention not to run for president, Bush has been without an obvious successor, and there has been considerable speculation over the years as to who will ultimately fill that spot, with guesses ranging from brother Jeb to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. I suspect the speculation can now end and that McCain will get the gig.

Some will question whether this is a position McCain would want, and certainly any doubts he might entertain would be understandable. That said, a sitting President, regardless of momentary political travails, can offer innumerable benefits to a successor, particularly in an intra-party contest. Given his own natural constituency, additional backing from the President would make McCain an exceptionally difficult candidate to beat in what is expected to be a bruising primary campaign. Bush may be down, but he’s far from out, and if he stages a comeback, his endorsement will carry significant weight.

Why would Bush agree to such an arrangement? Well, for starters, he is notoriously loyal, meaning that if McCain helps him out in his “time of need,” he will be unlikely not to support the Senator when it comes time to reciprocate. And Bush’s “time of need” is about to be extended.

While I am increasingly confident that the situation in Iraq will turn out relatively well for the administration, for the country, and for the Iraqis, Iraq is not the only troubled spot on the globe. The Iranians continue to act as if they wish for the final showdown

with the Great Satan to come sooner rather than later. New President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been purging what passes for “moderates” in the ranks of his country’s leaders; he and his scientists have reportedly begun a new round of uranium conversion; International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohammed ElBaradei reported last week that Iran received the blueprints for “casting uranium” that are necessary for making the “core of a nuclear warhead” from the infamous Pakistani scientist (and father of the “Islamic Bomb”) A.Q. Khan; and just yesterday, the Iranian “parliament” voted to block international inspectors from its atomic facilities.

In Israel, Prime Minister Sharon has announced that he will leave the Likud Party, start a new centrist party, and hold immediate elections. And though the ostensible goal of Sharon’s move is to continue to pursue peace with the Palestinians, there is little doubt that its net effect will be to add at least temporary additional instability to an already incredibly unstable region. There’s no guarantee, of course, that Sharon’s gambit will prove successful. And regardless of the outcome of the election, the Prime Minister, whoever he will be, will still have to deal with the fact that the continued escalation of rhetoric and actions from Iran are as much an Israeli problem as an American one. Certainly, the political situation in Israel over the next few months will reek of instability, and in that part of the world instability often translates into “explosiveness.”

Additionally, tensions are heating up in our own hemisphere. The war of words between Mexican President and Bush ally Vicente Fox and Venezuelan President and Castroite thug Hugo Chavez turned ugly last week, with each country expelling the other’s ambassador and with the severing of diplomatic relations between the two nations. Chavez, of course, doesn’t know that the Cold War is over and that his

side lost and has been trying to “export” his goofy neo-Marxist revolution to neighboring countries, making common cause with Latin American terrorist groups, some of which have, in turn, made common cause with al Qaeda. All of which is to say that Latin America now has its very own out-of-control dictator who is flush with cash from high oil prices, who is supporting terrorists, and who is intruding in the affairs of neighboring sovereign nations. Nice.

In short, then, the world is an ugly place and it may well get considerably uglier in the near future, irrespective of what happens in Iraq. The result of the Democrats’ unrelenting attacks on President Bush and his foreign policy and the Republicans’ now-established fecklessness has been the destruction of much of the administration’s credibility, which will hurt it badly when it is forced to confront these and other emerging national security issues. The President therefore will have little choice but to turn for help to the one man who retains both his media and public credibility on those issues and his hawkishness, John McCain. The pairing of McCain and Bush will be a surprising one to say the least, but it is more and more apparent that the President has few other options left.

Come January 2008, I fully expect that folks like Bill Frist and George Allen will be whining and complaining that they are the true heirs to Bush’s “conservatism” and that he should back one of them over the unreliably conservative “loose cannon” McCain. They’ll be right, of course, but that’ll be beside the point. Last week, when President Bush and his Iraq policy could have used a little support, Frist, Allen, and the rest of presidential wannabes in the Republican Senate caucus ran the other way. They have no one to blame but themselves. And President Bush has no one on whom to lean but McCain.

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