

**Mark L. Melcher** Publisher  
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

**Stephen R. Soukup** Editor  
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

## THEY SAID IT

I used to be incredulous when I saw universities schedule TV newsreaders as campus speakers. Why would anyone be interested in what they had to say when no one was handing them a script? I am wiser now. I now realize that news people really do make the news. They create it – a reality that we depend on, a miniature world that we look in on every day to assure ourselves that everything is under control or at least that we know the worst. These people, or their handlers, decide on a few developments that they hope we will be interested in and chose the tone and the slant that will grab us. Then they poll us to see whether they're succeeding.

*How the News Makes Us Dumb*, C. John Sommerville, 1999.

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## THE NEW SPORT OF POLITICS.

It is commonplace today to hear politicians, pundits, and political advocates declare that the American people are as polarized right now as they have been at any other time in the nation's history. I understand why some observers might think that this is the case, given the nasty nature of what passes for political debate today, the intensity with which the popular pundits attack each other on the various television "news" shows, and the fact that the polls show a shrinking "center" and a very clear bifurcation among the public along political lines. But I believe that these indicators are more reflective of a change in the culture than evidence of a dangerous and growing political divide among Americans.

This is, I know, a contrarian opinion. But if I am correct, it is of more than academic importance, since a true polarization of society over one or more highly contentious issues would be disruptive to the political, social, and economic well being of the nation and, as such, could have negative consequences for the financial markets. Indeed, the fact that the financial markets have done rather well this year may not be incontrovertible evidence that American society is healthy, but it is a good indicator that society is not as rent with dissent and anger as some maintain that it is.

So this week, I thought I would offer my contention that the contention that there is a high degree of contentiousness among the American public is contentious bunk. In fact, I will argue that the United States today is actually quite tranquil, both politically and socially, not only as compared to those periods in the nation's history when there was indeed a great deal of political and social turmoil but in the absolutely sense as well. And I will argue that those who beg to differ are confusing the day-to-day noise of a henhouse with that of a chicken processing plant. The sounds are very similar but the provocation is quite different.

I will begin by acknowledging that today's politicians and pundits are a strident and contentious lot and that the American public isn't much better. But it seems to me that the noise and anger that emanates from all of them is not the same as the noise and anger that marked the period before, during, and after the Civil War, or even the time of the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War protests. The dissenting voices in those by-gone days were highly focused and directed at forcing specific changes in public policy. In contrast, most of the antagonism that permeates the American political scene today seems to be narcissistic in nature, aimed more at drawing attention to the speaker than at having any realistic hope of significantly affecting the policies surrounding the issues involved.

Take, for example, the on-going battle over the war in Iraq, which is cited by just about everyone as the most contentious issue on the political front today. This is unquestionably a noisy and nasty dispute. But it is, for the most part, little more than street theater. It is entertaining, disturbing, and sometimes remarkably reflective of real life. But it's theater, nevertheless.

Recently, the production company moved the action to the floor of the House, where the performers engaged in screaming matches and threatening body language. Then they voted 403 to 3 to leave things essentially as they were before the scene opened. This legislative encounter had been preceded two months earlier by an "anti-war demonstration" in front of the White House. An AP story dated September 26, 2005 described it as follows.

Cindy Sheehan, the California woman who has used her son's death in Iraq to spur the antiwar movement, was arrested Monday while protesting outside the White House. Sheehan and *several dozen* other protesters [emphasis added] sat down on the sidewalk after marching along the pedestrian walkway on Pennsylvania Avenue. Police warned them three times that they were breaking the law by failing to move along, then began making arrests. Sheehan, 48, was the first taken into

custody. She stood up and was handcuffed, then led to a police vehicle while protesters chanted, "The whole world is watching." [An attached pictured showed her smiling broadly as they carried her to the paddy wagon.]

Contrast that "polarization" with the following description from geocities.com of events in Chicago on August 28, 1968 during the Democratic convention, which involved somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 antiwar demonstrators who were gathered at the Grant Park band shell. As the scene opens, these demonstrators are surrounded by hundreds of police and national guardsmen.

At the bandshell rally, news of the defeat of the peace plank [on the convention floor] is heard on radios. A young man begins to lower the American flag flying near the bandshell. Police push through the crowd to arrest him . . . A line of MOBE [National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam] marshals is formed between the police and the crowd. Police charge the marshal line. Rennie Davis is beaten unconscious.

At rally's end [David] Dellinger announces a march to the Amphitheatre, while [Tom] Hayden urges the crowd to move in small groups to the Loop. 6,000 join the march line, but, since it has no permit and the police refuse to allow it to use the sidewalks, the march does not move. After an hour of negotiation, the march line begins to break up. Protestors try to cross over to Michigan Avenue, but the Balbo and Congress bridges have been sealed off by National Guardsmen armed with .30 caliber machine guns and grenade launchers. The crowd moves north and finds that the Jackson Street bridge is unguarded. Thousands surge onto Michigan Avenue....

Deputy Police Superintendent James Rochford orders the police to clear the streets. Demonstrators and bystanders are clubbed,

beaten, Maced, and arrested. Some fight back and the attack escalates. The melee lasts about seventeen minutes and is filmed by the TV crews positioned at the Hilton. While this was probably not the most violent episode of Convention Week—the Lincoln Park and Old Town brawls were more vicious—it drew the most attention from the mass media.

Needless to say, that scene took place within a truly polarized and unhealthy society that was deeply and angrily divided not only between two very different alternative courses of action on the warfront, but over fundamental questions about the very nature of American democracy. It was a polarization that extended beyond the politicians and reached deeply into the hearts and minds of the American public, splitting families and communities along both generational and ideological lines. There was little ambiguity involved. The anger was real and directed. The positions on each side were hardened and distinctly different, ideologically and practically.

In contrast, shortly after the above-mentioned vote in the House that was overwhelming in favor of keeping American troops in Iraq, it was brought to the attention of Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman and U.S. Congressman Rahm Emanuel that not a single senior Democrat had yet proposed a policy for Iraq that was very different from the one being pursued by President Bush. When asked to comment on this fact, in light of all the noise surrounding the issue, Emanuel said simply, “At the right time, we will have a position.”

This is *not* polarization. This is *not* representative of a deep schism in Congress over policy. This is *not* the mark of a society that is being torn apart by diametrically opposed views. This is just politics, and largely unremarkable politics at that, with a lot of bells and whistles attached to keep the public from knowing that there isn't much of substance going on behind the scenes. This is politics imitating professional wrestling, where the contestants are gaudy farceurs who primp and pamper themselves and stage mock battles while their dim-witted fans cheer and laugh at their highly orchestrated excesses.

This is what politics looks like during good times, not bad times. This is what politics looks like when the nation is *not* deeply divided, when there are no serious ideological disputes dividing the public and disrupting society. This is the politics of petulance, which is marked by a great many complaints and a lot of whining but little if any movement because movement might upset a highly comfortable status quo.

Certainly, the fiscal deficits are large and Alan Greenspan may be right when he says that they will someday cause problems. And yes, federal spending is out of control. But right now, the world is buying American bonds as fast as the government can print them. And life is good. There is no political battle over how to address this problem. There are no opposing solutions or approaches. None. Nada. Zip. Neither the Bush White House nor the Congressional Republicans have anything meaningful to say on the subject that is substantially different from what the Democrats have to say. In fact, year after year, both parties routinely agree on approximately 98% of the federal budget with very little argument or discussion. Then they stage elaborate, farcical battles over a tiny portion of the spending total to make it appear that there is a dime's worth of difference between the two parties on the subject of federal spending.

Not only is there no polarization in Congress over spending, there is no polarization on this subject among the vast majority of Americans either. Americans from different walks of life and different regions fight among themselves for a teat like baby hogs do, and they squeal if they don't always connect. But the last thing any of them want is for the sow to dry up or leave the pen.

Yes, Social Security and Medicare will go broke someday. But that's not happening right now is it? In fact, the public doesn't want to hear about it right now. There is no political battle over how to address this problem. There are no opposing solutions or approaches. None. Nada. Zip. Neither the Bush White House nor the Congressional Republicans have anything meaningful to say on the subject that is substantially different from what the Democrats have to say. A year or so ago, the Bush White House

made a feeble effort to address the problem, but the Republicans didn't care enough to sell it and the public didn't care enough to even listen to the pitch. This isn't a polarization. This is politics during good times, during times when jobs, money, and credit are plentiful and citizens are fat, happy, and complacent.

At the present time, there is only one battle going on in Washington that is of any significance and that is the battle for political supremacy. All of the other problems that face the nation, both big and small, are little more than weapons for use in this all important fight. A few years ago, Republicans somehow managed to convince the American public that they are the good guys. They gained power and they want to keep it. Democrats want to take it back. That's what is important right now. Everything else is derivative to this struggle.

Sure there's a war going on in Iraq. And yes there once was a time when the politics stopped at the border. But that was then and this is now, and now there's a no-holds-barred war over political power and that means that the Iraq war is fair game.

A week or so after the above-mentioned fight on the House floor when the Democrats got trounced over their public relations stunt to weaken public confidence in George Bush's handling of the Iraq war, Nancy Pelosi jumped back into the ring like Hulk Hogan, stomped around for a while shaking her little fist, and announced to her cheering fans that while she and her tag team partner John Murtha may have lost that round, the grudge match would continue. And then she renewed the cry to "bring the boys home now." Her fans cheered loudly while the other side booed happily. Everyone loved it. Miller Lite and Cheese Dip versus Chablis and Brie. Larry the Cable Guy versus Michael Moore. It's great theater. Indeed, it just doesn't get any better than this! But once again, it was about politics. It was not about military strategy. Nor was it a sign of polarization. It was a sign that an election is coming up and that the Democrats are looking for a soft spot.

I am not trying to minimize the problems facing the United States today. Most especially, I am not trying to minimize the importance of the debate over Iraq. I am simply saying that, for the most part, this is normal politics at work in a reasonably healthy democracy. Polarization denotes a fight over two very different alternative courses of action, and neither the Democrats nor a substantial portion of the American public has enthusiastically endorsed anything resembling a set of alternative plans to the ones that George Bush is pursuing.

Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean says things like "I hate Republicans," and "the struggle between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party is a struggle between good and evil – and we're the good," and Republicans "have never made an honest living in their lives." His fans cheer. His enemies boo. Everyone has a good time. It's the Redskins versus the Cowboys. Some fans get more agitated than others. But they all go about their business when the game is over. Rarely does Dean or anyone else mention alternative approaches to the nation's problems, either because he doesn't have any or because those that he does have would not be favored by a large percentage of the American public. But no one recognizes this or cares if they do.

If it seems at times that political debate today is unusually nasty and that the animosity between liberals and conservatives is particularly intense, I believe, as I said earlier, that this more a function of a change in the culture than of a dangerous and growing political divide among Americans. It is a fact that some cultures are naturally more raucous and noisy than others, and American culture is moving in that direction. I believe that this is, in part, a function of the fact that politics in America today has become an extremely large and lucrative part of the entertainment industry. It has become a highly popular spectator sport with more fans and much more money involved than professional baseball, football and basketball combined.

Politics in America has become a sports-like enterprise complete with superstars and former superstars, cheerleaders, fan clubs, technical experts, color commentators, and huge corporations anxious to have their brands associated with the big name players. It is a sport that is never off the air and never out-of-season. The game runs 24 hours a day, every day of the year, so it must be particularly intense at all times in order to keep fans and advertisers interested. It must have heated rivalries and intense competitive conflict to win ratings. It will not tolerate leaving politics at the shoreline. It will not tolerate kinder and gentler.

To keep interest in the game high, the industry has professional agitators, people who get the crowd riled up and keep them that way. They are the heart and soul of the business, more important than the politicians themselves. On the right there are people like Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Hannity, Coulter, Krauthammer, Kristol, etc., etc., etc. On the left, there are Colmes, Maher, Franken, Stephanopoulos, Clift, Carville, Begala, Estrich, etc., etc., etc. And then there are hundreds of "experts" on any and all subjects available to keep the ball in the air. Pollsters, former military personnel, current and former bureaucrats, academics, former politicians, former and current political aids and advisors, sociologists, economists, political scientists, CEOs and accountants, trade experts, even climatologists.

And then there are the professional advocates, whose job it is to sell the importance of their particular "cause" and to organize and rally their faithful followers to crusade on behalf of this cause. There are the "feminists," environmentalists, abortion activists on both sides of the controversy, gun advocates and gun opponents, etc., etc., etc. Turn on "the news" and representatives of all of these groups and causes appear like magic with "opinions and commentaries" to match all tastes and moods on all subjects, large and small. Guaranteed to please.

And then there's a huge contingent of technical and intellectual talent behind the scenes to keep the game moving, keep it lively, keep the crowd interested, even when there's not much grist for the mill. They

keep the tempo up during quiet times and stoke the flames during hot times. They decide what is "news" and what isn't, and how to play it in order to get and keep "the ratings." Recently, National Public Radio interviewed Ted Koppel and Nightline producer Tom Bettag. Here's what they said about the changes that have occurred in "the news" business during the 25 years that Nightline was on the air.

Koppel: "More emphasis is placed now on trying to tailor the news and tailor the stories that we cover to the perceived interests of our favored commercial customers, rather than news men and women doing what I have always believed we should do, and that is tell people what is important, try to make it as interesting as we possibly can, but focus on the importance of the issues rather than focusing simply on what it is they think they want to hear and see."

Bettag: "There's been a dramatic shift in the last five years that advertisers have changed the rules so that in television the only audience that you get ratings for are the 18 to 49 audience and in some cases 18 to 52. But advertisers do not pay for any viewer who is over the age of 50, so when there's a major concentration on something like the Lacy Peterson story that is largely because the most attractive demographic is the 18 to 39 year old upper middle class women . . . that shapes the news much more than Ted or I have been comfortable with . . . The rules have been changed, it's a certain kind of ratings and again, you just wonder why certain stories seem to get run into the ground, the central demographic that you're trying to hit most of the time is 18 to 49 is the standard for prime time television, women 18 to 39 are the absolutely preferred demographic . . .

From one perspective, this is not necessarily a bad thing. An interested and informed public is the heart of a healthy democracy and if it takes a little show business and viewer manipulation to keep them

interested and informed in a society with so many other diversions and attractions then so be it. On the other hand, there is little question that the constant manufacturing of controversy and anger, along with a deliberate managing of news content based on polling data, in an effort to keep the public agitated and “tuned in,” can have a detrimental impact on public confidence in government, on policy itself, and even on the nation’s politicians, most of whom are a malleable and easily influenced lot.

For the time being, the good news is that the public reaction to this burgeoning “news-as-entertainment” industry appears to be a growing cynicism about the “news” and “commentary” that it is selling. This seems evident from the fact that the public doesn’t appear to be anywhere near as agitated, polarized, or even as emotionally involved as the professional agitators would like them to be.

In the long run, I suspect that this reaction will either limit the negative impact of this news colossus or force it to evolve into something more benign. Perhaps someday, Fox’s News’ well known slogan “fair and balanced,” which speaks volumes about the questionable nature of the “news” industry today, will be replaced by a more Socratic phrase such as “truthful and prudent.” We can only hope.

## THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT THE DEMOCRATS.

There is a sub-genre of movie comedy that I particularly detest. It’s the type of film in which the protagonist finds himself in a series of incredibly awkward situations and always manages somehow to make the worst of things, to humiliate himself thoroughly, and to make the audience – or at least me – cringe and squirm in sheer embarrassment. Even when it looks like he has at long last managed to catch a break, our hero nevertheless finds a way to screw things up again and to wind up in a bigger, more painful-to-watch mess than before. Judging from the popularity of such movies, a great many people

actually enjoy this sort of agonizing awkwardness and find the hero-loser’s idiocy entertaining. I don’t. It makes me deeply uneasy.

Unfortunately, that kind of unease is next to impossible for me to avoid these days. Watching Nancy Pelosi, Howard Dean, John Kerry, and the rest of the Democratic establishment (*sans* Hillary, of course) ply their trade is far more painful, discomfiting, and cringe-inducing than even the “best” Ben Stiller movie. Indeed, it seems that no matter how poorly Republicans manage to conduct themselves or the affairs of state, they can always count on the Democrats to bail them out of any embarrassing situation by doing something so outrageously asinine that it draws the attention of the aghast, yet bemused public.

Just a few short weeks ago, for example, President Bush was struggling mightily to keep his head above water and to keep the American public from concluding that he was every bit as incompetent and deceitful as Michael Moore and the folks at MoveOn.org had always said he was. Republicans in Congress were panicked by the off-year election results in New Jersey and Virginia, had begun fretting about the midterm election, and were slowly but surely coming to the conclusion that they had no choice but to do the weak and intellectually bankrupt thing and abandon the President and the war effort. In short, the GOP was losing the domestic side of the war.

But then the Democrats changed the political dynamic by inexplicably going on the attack. The problems that are developing from this latest iteration of the Democrats’ counter-offensive on Iraq are at least two-fold. First, it comes at precisely the wrong time. Second, and most important, it serves little purpose other than to remind the American public of the Democratic Party’s shameful record on national security matters over the last four decades and to suggest that many in the party actually revel at the prospect of the American military and the nation in general being brought low and “taught a lesson” about the use of force and the role of combat in modern political diplomacy.

In less than two weeks, Iraqis will go to the polls once again, this time to elect a new, semi-permanent legislature. In so doing, they will complete at least the superficial transition from dictatorship to protectorate to consensual constitutional government. Certainly Iraq will not be a “democracy” as Westerners understand the term, and it may never be. But it will be the closest thing to a democracy that any nation in the Arab world has ever experienced. And it will mark the completion of many of the necessary steps on the road to “democratization.”

At that point, the “insurgency” will clearly have failed in its primary objective, which was to prevent the adoption of constitutional governance. Zarqawi and his lot will not give up and go home, of course, but they will have been dealt a significant psychological blow, having failed either to halt the electoral process through intimidation or to convince the preponderance of their fellow Sunnis that “democracy” is anti-Islamic and should therefore be rejected with extreme prejudice.

As for the actual battle against the Ba’athist remnants and al Qaeda terrorists, that too appears to be progressing, disconsolate reports from the mainstream media notwithstanding. As President Bush has noted several times in recent speeches, the training of Iraqi forces to deal with the “insurgency” on their own – long argued by both sides in the debate to be the most critical measure of progress – is coming along nicely. Reports from the front lines, from soldiers, from embedded reporters, and even from American politicians who have visited the front (e.g. Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman) paint a much different picture both of morale and of accomplishment than is generally relayed to the public.

And finally, serious analyses of battle-related statistics and actual front-line reporting suggest that the American military with help from Iraqis has become more aggressive and more effective in chasing down and killing the enemy. A number of analysts have noted that the number of American casualties attributed to hostile fire has increased as a percentage of total casualties over the past couple of months.

While some observers, such as the tired and tiresome McGovernite Gary Hart, might complain that this is a terribly distressing development, people who actually know something about the subject appear to believe otherwise, arguing that such a shift in casualties is generally not considered a sign of defeat or reversal of fortune, but of increased offensive activity, which, in turn, is a sign that American troops are engaging the enemy more often and more aggressively.

Additionally, reporter/blogger Bill Roggio, who is currently embedded with the Marines 2<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team in Iraq, reports that this increased level of engagement, much of which has taken place along the infamous Syrian border, was scripted to push the “insurgents” where the U.S. military wanted them, essentially cornering them for a larger more concentrated offensive.

None of this is to say that victory is right around the corner or that President Bush and his advisors should be planning to break the “Mission Accomplished” banner out of mothballs any time soon. But it is to say that the Democrats, whose leaders have both the tinniest of political ears and a shockingly dreadful sense of timing, appear to be bailing out on the operation just as the light at the end of the tunnel is becoming visible. There are and will always be disputes as to how much actual progress is being made and whether the accomplishments cited by the administration are truly as wonderful as they would have us believe. But all things considered, it is hard to argue cogently that things are not moving in the right direction. Indeed, as things stand today, it appears more and more that the President’s Democratic and paleo-conservative critics, who deny any and all signs of progress, are the ones who are “disconnected from reality,” to borrow a phrase from Senator and foreign policy “realist” Chuck Hagel.

Now, I can’t say for certain whether the Democrats used to believe that the war was a good idea and are moving aggressively against it now because they are craven and cynical or if their initial support was what was craven and cynical and their current opposition is, in actuality, an expression of deeply held, if

temporarily restrained, principles. I don't really think it matters, since in either case their ongoing inability to understand the American people constitutes yet another of those painfully awkward scenes in which they are fated to squander any potential good fortune and to wind up instead embarrassing themselves.

Indeed, there is evidence already that the tough talk against the war is having an opposite effect of that which was intended, alienating the anti-warriors from rather than endearing them to the American public. According to *The Washington Post*, a recent poll by RT Strategies (a bi-partisan polling firm run by Democrat Thomas Riehle and Republican Lance Tarrance) found that the American public is not exactly sympathetic to the anti-warriors' cause, irrespective of their beliefs about the war. To wit:

Seventy percent of people surveyed said that criticism of the war by Democratic senators hurts troop morale -- with 44 percent saying morale is hurt "a lot," according to a poll taken by RT Strategies. Even self-identified Democrats agree: 55 percent believe criticism hurts morale, while 21 percent say it helps morale . . .

Their poll also indicates many Americans are skeptical of Democratic complaints about the war. Just three of 10 adults accept that Democrats are leveling criticism because they believe this will help U.S. efforts in Iraq. A majority believes the motive is really to "gain a partisan political advantage."

Further evidence of the political peril associated with the Democrats' attack on President Bush and the war in Iraq can be found in other polling data. For example much has been made over the last few months about the sagging poll numbers of Republican politicians. President Bush's approval ratings, which have dipped as approval of the war effort has dipped, are, at 34%, three points lower than were Richard Nixon's at the same point in his second term. The numbers for Congressional Republicans are even worse, with a recent Harris Poll showing their approval

at a scant 27%. But it's not exactly as if the anti-Bush/anti-warrior crowd is benefiting from the GOP's woes. Unfortunately for Nancy, Howard, Harry, and the gang, that 27% approval is still 2 points *higher* than the approval rating for Democrats in Congress.

And as unlikely as it seems right now, things might actually get worse for the Democrats as they continue their offensive against the war. Conventional wisdom holds that since Bush has allowed support for the war to ebb so significantly, the cause is now lost. This idea is based on the "fact" that "never before" has such an unpopular war been re-popularized (as if unpopular wars happen often enough that such an assessment makes any sense at all). But conventional wisdom may well prove wrong. President Bush's long-overdue defense of his foreign policy actually appears to be paying dividends, perhaps even winning back some of the skeptics who had begun to question the Commander-in-Chief's commitment to the cause. According to a Rasmussen Reports survey published last Friday, Americans are actually more confident in the progress of the war. Rasmussen put it thusly:

Confidence in the War on Terror is up sharply compared to a month ago. Forty-eight percent (48%) of Americans now believe the U.S. and its Allies are winning. That's up nine points from 39% a month ago and represents the highest level of confidence measured in 2005.

Just 28% now believe the terrorists are winning, down six points from 34% a month ago. The survey was conducted on Wednesday and Thursday night following the President's speech outlining his strategy in Iraq.

Finally, there was a survey published late last month by Pew Research that showed that average Americans are far more optimistic about the outcome of the war in Iraq than are a host of sub-categories of "elites." When all of this is combined, what emerges is a picture of a public that is troubled by the war in Iraq, but which is troubled even more by the idea of losing



the war and which wants simply to be reassured that the war is winnable and that the White House is doing everything in its power to do so.

Until recently, the Democrats could pretend that they were merely upset with the way President Bush had handled the war and that they were simply advocating more competent leadership. This put them more or less in line with the sentiments expressed by the public. But over the last couple of weeks, a *bona fide* anti-war, “bring the boys home” contingent has taken over the direction of the party, with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi leading the charge. At the same time, the party’s leading foreign policy thinkers, big shots like Richard Holbrook, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Madeline Albright, are unable or unwilling to bring anything constructive to the dialogue, with Holbrook summing up the Democratic foreign establishment’s most profound thinking on the subject by declaring “I’m not prepared to lay out a detailed policy or strategy.” All of which is to say that the public face of the Democratic Party is now one that advocates capitulation and withdrawal and offers no other alternatives.

This is not, in my opinion, a strategy that the American public is likely to favor. For months now, various analysts – including Mark and me – have noted that one significant difference between Vietnam and Iraq is that this time no one at home is openly cheering for America’s defeat. And while I still tend to believe that, I’m not entirely sure the American public still does or, if it does, that it will do so for long. Democrats like Pelosi, John Kerry, and Howard Dean ceaselessly compare Iraq to Vietnam and propose that since they “saved” the nation from that war that they can save it from this one as well.

What never seems to occur to them is that the American public might truly detest any comparison to Vietnam. Pelosi, Kerry, Dean, and the rest of the sad, aging hippy crowd look back at the Vietnam War with nostalgia, remembering the good times they had and the power they believed they wielded when they “changed the world.” But much of the rest of the nation looks back at the war with shame,

understanding that America’s defeat there was a global tragedy that not only unleashed Communist mass murderers on the populations of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos but also signaled American weakness to the rest of the world, thereby presaging such events as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, and the Communist penetration of Central America.

The Democrats grouse and grumble that it is unfair that voters question their dedication to matters of national security, yet it is they who constantly bring up the most pertinent and powerful reminder of that lack of dedication. The Democrats’ obsession with Vietnam does little but conjure unpleasant memories and remind the American people which party it was that controlled Congress and voted to defund the war, to abandon our South Vietnamese allies, and unofficially to declare defeat. Even when Democrats think that they can avoid the “weak on defense” rap by having a decorated and respected veteran make the case for bringing the troops home, they send forth someone like John Kerry or Jack Murtha, each of whom is described in every news story as a “Vietnam veteran,” and thereby serves simply to remind the public of the war that America lost.

It doesn’t help the Democrats in any of this that the home city of House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (San Francisco) used last month’s elections to try to opt out of its responsibility to help defend the nation by voting to ban military recruiters from its *public* high schools and that Pelosi’s response to the vote was, essentially, to shrug her shoulders. It also doesn’t help that high-profile Democrats in the home state of big shot anti-Bushies Kerry and Ted Kennedy, including Teddy’s nephew, former Congressman Joseph P. Kennedy II, and current Democratic Congressman William Delahunt, negotiated and agreed to what amounts to a bribe of cheap heating oil given by global wacko, terrorist sponsor, and aggressive anti-American Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in return for the chance to try to rehabilitate his image and to ingratiate himself to the anti-Bush crowd.

It's almost as if the leaders of the Democratic Party want the American public to question their dedication to the nation's security. What with the constant and wistful invocations of the country's worst national security humiliation, the refusal to defend the nation, and the chumming around with "revolutionary" thugs, how can the public think anything else?

This would all be comical, if it weren't so excruciatingly painful to watch. After more than three decades of bumbling their way through any discussion of foreign policy and national security matters, the war on terror provided the Democrats with an opportunity to get serious. And the war in Iraq gave them a chance to put their new seriousness into practice and to offer an alternative. But like the hapless hero in a loser-comedy movie, all they've managed to do is take those chances and bungle them even more.

As I have noted several times over the last few years, the Republican Party's greatest strength right now is its opponent, which almost never fails to do the

wrong thing. If the GOP is still "The Stupid Party" – and there is more than ample reason to believe that it is – then the Democrats must be the "got so drunk that you stole the microphone from the DJ and told everyone at the engagement party, including your fiancé and her father, how attracted you are to your mother-in-law-to-be" party.

Indeed, the Democrats' knack for making observers cringe is frankly creepy. And while Americans might find that kind of embarrassing asininity endearing in a movie character, they find it more than just a tad bit disconcerting in a political party that purports to know how best to defend the nation. Americans may well have had enough of the current crop of Republicans, and who could blame them? But given the alternative and the fact that there is still a war to be fought, what choice do they have?

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