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THEY SAID IT

What does it mean when the world's hyperpower, responsible for 40 percent of the planet's military spending, decides it cannot withstand a guerrilla war with historically low casualties against a ragbag of local insurgents and imported terrorists? You can call it "redeployment" or "exit strategy" or "peace with honor" but, by the time it's announced on al-Jazeera, you can pretty much bet that whatever official euphemism was agreed on back in Washington will have been lost in translation . . .

Mark Steyn, "Hyperpower Hiatus," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, November 13, 2006.

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IRAQ: IT'S ALL OVER BUT THE DYING.

Our mission this week is to offer what we will call, for lack of a better term, a "working assumption" about America's future in Iraq. This is not a prediction. There are too many variables and too many new people involved in the process to be comfortable making predictions. This is something less than that, something that may serve as a basis for making predictions later, or that may be discarded later when more facts come in and certain unknowns become known.

So, with this disclaimer in mind, we will declare that our working assumption on Iraq right now is that the United States tossed in the towel last Tuesday. The questions remaining to be answered are how long it will take to "bring the boys home," how bloody this exit exercise will be, and where the new battle lines with militant Islam will be drawn. Needless to say, this represents a break from many of our past predictions. So we'll deal with some of those right now.

The day after the elections last Tuesday, we made several optimistic assumptions, the most prominent of which was our expectation that President Bush and Speaker Pelosi could get a good-cop-bad-cop routine going with the leaders of the new Iraqi government. We now believe we were wrong. Don Rumsfeld's defenestration disabused us of the notion that the White House could credibly play the "good cop" roll, i.e., convincing the leaders in Iraqi that if they act responsibly he can keep the "get-out-now" Democrats at bay and America will stay and fight.

We now assume that the smart Iraqis would not believe President Bush even if he tried that ploy. They may not be the crème de la crème of Iraqi intelligentsia, but they don't need a Daniel to read the handwriting on the wall for them. Our "working assumption" is that the smart Iraqis will begin to prepare for life without the Americans. This will involve a variety of options ranging from stealing everything that is not nailed down and fleeing the country to sucking up to a militia leader in hopes of not being a victim in the blood bath that is sure to occur in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal.

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It is worth noting here that, contrary to what John Kerry believes, the Americans fighting in Iraq are not stupid either, and many of them and their loved ones back home are going to decide that there is no honor in being the last soldier to die in a war that has already been lost. If we are right about this, Democrats will have an even greater incentive to push for an earlier withdrawal than the Bush crowd wants, probably beginning with the demands that all National Guard and Reserve troops begin coming home *post haste*.

With this in mind, we will acknowledge that we were wrong when we thought in the immediate aftermath of the election last week that the Democrats would now assume a responsible roll in the debate over what to do next in Iraq. It is much more likely that they will push and push hard for a quick withdrawal, heaping criticism on President Bush for dragging his feet. That's what their constituency wants them to do and that's what they will do. This is not, by the way, meant as criticism. The fact is that there is no reason for them to do otherwise, if we are right that the Bush White House has already decided to pull the plug.

Our working assumption is that the exit strategy, when it is finally decided upon, will involve behind the scenes negotiations with the Iranians. We could be wrong about this, and we hope we are. But if the circus pays a lot of money to hire a guy with a pony who can stand on one leg and play a bugle, it stands to reason that one of the new acts in the center ring is going to include a pony standing on one leg playing a bugle. Jim Baker is a one trick pony. He negotiates. That's what he does. And with whom, pray tell, is he going to negotiate if not the Iranians?

It is worth noting here that if you "Google" the phrase "Iraq Study Group" along with the word "victory," you will pull up a great many stories declaring that the "Iraq Study Group Will Rule Out Victory." If you "Google" the phrase "Iraq Study Group" along with the word "defeat" you will pull up a great many stories about the GOP defeat in the off-year elections and the consequences of a U.S. defeat in Iraq. You will be disappointed if you expect to find a story discussing the Iraq Study Group's determination to achieve victory or to avoid defeat.

It is hard to say what Baker would have to offer the Iranians in exchange for their cooperation in helping to restore some degree of peace in Baghdad, so the Bush administration can save some face on the way out by proclaiming that it has accomplished what it came to do, which was to establish "democracy" there.

He has only two cards to play. The first is to promise to pretend to believe them when they say they have no intention of building a nuclear weapon. This won't be difficult, given that the Bush administration is already fully engaged in this hear-no-evil, see-no-evil deception. But it's hard to see how this benefits the Iranians. They have already figured out that President Bush is all mouth and trousers when it comes to honoring his pledge to prevent both Iran and North Korea from joining the nuclear club.

The second card that Baker could play is to place the Bush administration's continued support for Israel on the table. This is somewhat trickier, but there is no one in the entire world better at it than Jim Baker. Indeed, he can read from the crib notes he used during the old days of "shuttle diplomacy" when he was the first President Bush's hammer in convincing Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians in exchange for "lasting peace." If he wishes to establish his credibility with the Iranians, he can simply cite his most famous line regarding Israel, "F*** the Jews, they don't vote for us anyway."

Not surprisingly, Tony Blair is apparently fully on board with this strategy. Not only are his countrymen growing weary of Blair's dogged support for the war, but a growing number of English citizens are convinced that abandoning any and all support for Israel would go a long way toward buying peace with the increasingly large and dangerous population of terrorists within their midst. It is no accident that London is now routinely referred to as Londonistan by counter-terrorism experts worldwide.

Blair will address the Iraq Study Group tomorrow via video link. His office has provided no public statement as to what he intends to say, but the *Washington Post* noted the following yesterday.

The *Guardian* newspaper on Saturday reported that Blair would urge the panel to push the Bush administration to begin talks with Syria and Iran to persuade those two countries to become more involved in finding a solution to the situation in Iraq. The newspaper also reported that Blair would press Baker and Hamilton to recommend that any solution in Iraq depends on the United States making a “reenergized push for peace in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”

Of course, the process of withdrawal from Iraq will go on for a long time, during which Newton’s rule about actions prompting reactions is going to be proven many times over. It is impossible to fathom all of the ramifications of the prospect of a giant, fabulously wealthy, Shi’ite axis comprising Iran, Iraq and Syria, smack dab in the Middle East, armed with nuclear weapons, driven by implacable hatred, and directed by a crowd of fanatical Mullahs. But that’s where this thing is headed. And if you don’t think so, then we would ask you to try to conjure up an alternative scenario that includes withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. Will Europe move in to contain the new Caliphate? Russia? China? The United Nations? The Kurds? Maybe the “good Muslims” will save the day. After all, theirs is a “religion of peace.” Perhaps Israel will do it all by itself. They will have no choice but to try.

We should make it clear that we are not a couple of neo-cons here, angry that our dream of a democratic Iraq has been shattered. We have never been fans of the democratization venture. Instead, we have shared the belief with the administration that an Iraq without Saddam is better than an Iraq with him, that fighting America’s Muslim enemies in Iraq is better than fighting them in the United States, and that leaving Iraq precipitously would be a disaster. It is this last point that concerns us now. Our fear and our “working assumption” is that President Bush is going to make a terrible hash out of this process, mollycoddling both Iran and the Democrats on the way out and leaving the Republican Party with a permanent claim to minority status at a time when militant Islam is gaining strength and allies worldwide.

As we have said many times in these pages, the United States will eventually win the war that militant Islam is waging against it. Unfortunately, it looks as if Americans will have to suffer at least one more serious terrorist incident, similar to or greater than the September 11 attacks, before they will be willing to collectively commit to the kind of long and expensive effort that will be required to achieve that victory.

LEARNING LESSONS.

We agree with a great many conservative commentators, analysts, and political operatives who have suggested that last week’s election did not mark a Democratic victory but a Republican defeat. The GOP forgot what it believes, stubbornly refused to listen to its constituents on a variety of matters, lost its way, and ultimately lost the election. The Democrats didn’t actually run a campaign so much as they had the good sense to stay out of the way while the Republicans self-destructed.

The result of all of this is that the GOP’s fall from power was its own doing, which means that the next two years are going to be filled with recriminations and finger pointing as well as repeated queries as to what can and should be learned from the defeat.

The libertarian wing of the GOP will say that it learned that big government-compassionate conservatism is political death. The Rockefeller Republicans will claim to have figured out that conservatism itself is the problem, particularly in the Northeast, where the party was totally wiped out. Secularists will say that they learned that the religious right can’t be trusted, while evangelicals will profess to have discovered precisely what happens to a party when it grows too far removed from its religious base and allows material forces to compromise traditional values.

All of this is well and good. Certainly this is a debate that must be had. And we’re fairly certain that we will make our own contributions to it as time wears on. But if one really wants to understand how the next

two years are going to play out politically and how this new political reality is going to affect the remainder of the Bush presidency and the 2008 campaign, all of the upcoming discussion about the GOP is largely beside the point. What the Republicans have learned or will learn is a secondary question at best. What really matters, at least for the foreseeable future, is what – if anything – the Democrats have learned during their twelve years in exile.

The Washington Post, for one, appears to believe that the Democrats have learned quite a bit. Yesterday, in a front-page, above-the-fold article, the *Post* declared that “Democrats preparing to take control of Congress for the first time in over a decade are looking to the Republican takeover in 1995 as an object lesson of what to emulate and what to avoid.”

Of course, one need only read a couple of paragraphs before it becomes obvious that the “lessons” the *Post* has in mind are just standard, partisan, political platitudes, essentially a continuation of the campaign. Democrats want to match the energy of early Gingrich-led House, but avoid all of the stuff that made the Republican majority so darned mean and nasty. For example, “Democrats say they will avoid the overreaching, arrogance and rancorous partisanship that left them [the Republicans] virtually powerless on Capitol Hill and spawned an era of political corruption and influence-peddling.” Blah. Blah. Blah. Needless to say, these aren’t the lessons we had in mind.

On the surface, we’d have to say that too many Democrats appear to have learned almost nothing, at least about economics. Apparently, the first order of business for the new majority party will be to pass an increase in the minimum wage. Far be it from us to criticize this staple of liberal economic reform. But one could be forgiven for thinking that in an era of full employment and rising employment costs, in which inflation remains the chief threat to economic stability, even Democrats might ponder long and hard over the consequences of implementing policy proposals that would push each of these trends in the wrong direction and that were first proposed, *during the Great Depression*. But then, one would be wrong.

By the same count, one might expect that in an era of low taxes on capital, overflowing Treasury coffers, and falling (yes, that’s right, we said *falling*) deficits, liberals and their economic guru, Wall Street big shot Robert Rubin, might feel that intellectual honesty would compel them to find a justification for their love of taxes that doesn’t rely on tired chestnuts about the need to combat deficits with “increased revenues.” But again, one would be wrong.

At the same, there is considerable reason to believe that Democrats have learned at least a few things. Indeed, it appears that they have learned a great deal about running campaigns, much of it over the last two years. For starters, Democrats learned that ballot initiatives can be wonderful voter-turnout aides. In 2004, Republicans used ballot initiatives on same-sex marriage to turn out their voters in critically important states like Ohio. They did the same this year, though less successfully. Meanwhile, Democrats used their own initiatives, most notably one dealing with the minimum wage, to bring their own voters to the polls. Minimum wage initiatives coupled with strong union get-out-the-vote efforts made the difference for Democrats in many states and districts.

More to the point, Democrats learned that two issues in particular, abortion and guns, were killing them and that they would stand a much better chance, particularly with Southern, Western, and rural voters, if they would simply drop both. So they did. The heretofore, customary Democratic litmus test on abortion was eliminated, at least in practice, making it possible for pro-Life Democrats to win in such places as Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Likewise, the issue of guns was purged from party campaign orthodoxy, helping to paint states like Colorado, New Mexico, Virginia, and Montana deep, dark shades of purple.

The pertinent question now is whether these and other lessons have become deeply enough ingrained in the Democratic psyche to be a part of the party’s governing philosophy, or if they were mere campaign ploys. The constituencies that favor Second Amendment restrictions and unfettered access to abortion are strong and will most assuredly expect

to be paid off now that the Democrats are back in power. As *The Los Angeles Times* noted yesterday:

Some of the very activists who helped propel the Democrats to a majority in the House and Senate last week are claiming credit for the victories and demanding what they consider their due: a set of ambitious — and politically provocative — actions on gun control, abortion, national security and other issues that party leaders fear could alienate moderate voters and leave Democrats vulnerable to GOP attacks . . .

The biggest test that Speaker-designate Pelosi will face in the early part of her speakership will be keeping groups like these under control. Certainly, she can't simply abandon her party's base outright, but she can't give into them either — at least not if she expects to be Speaker for more than a couple years. Gun control is poison for the Democrats. And despite the rejection of a complete ban on abortion in South Dakota, “reproductive rights” are as well.

In our estimation, the success of the new Democratic majority and the likelihood that it will be retained after 2008 hinge on the party's ability to absorb the following lessons, (recounted in order of ascending importance).

The Lessons of Impeachment. Don't get us wrong, we still think Bill Clinton deserved to be impeached. But there can be little doubt that the entire process, *especially when coupled with the other myriad high-profile investigations of Bill and Hillary*, had serious and negative political implications for the Republican Party. The only modern president to avoid the “sixth-year slump” just executed upon the Republicans was Bill Clinton. And a big part of the reason for this was the public's weariness with the whole business of scandal. Speaker-designate Pelosi would be well advised to remember that Newt Gingrich, who was in every way her political superior, was felled by “scandal fatigue.”

Democrats should proceed with caution, unless they are certain that they will uncover evidence of wrongdoing that will ensure the legitimacy of their

efforts regardless of the potential political costs (as was the case with the Clintons). It's not that they can't or shouldn't investigate; after all, that's one of the perks of the majority. But they should be judicious in their choices of topics and targets to pursue, lest they give the impression that they are seeking political payback and are driven principally by pettiness and vengeance.

Those Democrats who are looking for assurance on this matter should be more than a little concerned. Both Pelosi and Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean have vowed that the President will not be impeached. But they will nonetheless have a tough time keeping the septuagenarian committee chairmen from exacting their revenge, not just for Clinton, but for twelve years of being deprived of their rightful positions of prominence.

Judiciary Committee chairman John Conyers is on the far left fringes of the Democratic Party and, frankly, on the far fringes of sanity. As *National Review's* Ned Rice put it last week, Conyers is “the House's version of a senile uncle puttering around the place with his bathrobe open muttering about Mamie van Doren's chest or fluoridated water.” Conyers may be losing it, but he'll have a gavel, and Speaker Pelosi will have a tough time keeping him from trying smack President Bush and Vice President Cheney with it.

Over at the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, incoming chairman Henry Waxman is, if anything, more liberal and potentially more implacable than Conyers. And lest anyone get the misimpression that Chairman Waxman will be able to control his appetites, his biggest lament last week could be summed with the phrase “so many investigations, so little time.” “I'm going to have an interesting time because the Government Reform Committee has jurisdiction over everything,” Waxman said on Friday. “The most difficult thing will be to pick and choose.”

The Lessons of '94. Throughout the just-completed campaign, various precedent elections were cited repeatedly. Some claimed it was 1982 all over again;

some said 1986; and some said 1994. The “precedent game” continues today, as analysts and pundits try to figure out which previous midterm last week’s contest most resembles. Arguments can be made for many of these purported precedents. But in our estimation, the election that sticks out is 1992. Granted, ’92 was not a midterm, but the position the Democrats find themselves in today bears a striking resemblance to that in which they found themselves after Bill Clinton won the presidency.

Last week, as in ’92, the Democrats scored a significant electoral victory, wresting political control from the Republicans, who had held it for 12 years (then the presidency; today Congress). And, again as in ’92, this victory was the result of a low-key campaign in which the party presented itself as a reasonable, temperate alternative to the out-of-touch and incompetent GOP. It is no mere coincidence, we should note, that this Democratic victory was engineered by Rahm Emanuel, the head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and a veteran of the Clinton administration. Emanuel saw what worked for his old boss and put the same principles into play in his recruiting and campaign strategies. And they paid off.

But what will the party do now? Recall that after Bill Clinton’s “centrist” victory in ’92, he took a sharp turn to the left and governed less as a moderate and more as the radical Republicans had always claimed he was. And in the next election, a scant two years after his “historic” victory, the walls came crumbling down upon him.

There were many reasons why the GOP was able to win Congress for the first time in four decades back in ’94. But one of the most significant of these was Bill’s betrayal of the promises of his campaign two years earlier. It’s not that he didn’t pass this plan or enact that policy. It’s that voters thought they were getting a moderate, and instead they got a liberal. And they didn’t like it.

Clinton wised up, of course, and spent the rest of his time in the White House trying to expunge the first two years from voters’ memories and governing from

the center. And despite his party’s monstrous loss in ’94, he left office a hero to Democrats and well liked by the public at large.

Here again, however, those Democrats looking for reassurance are unlikely to find any. Emanuel engineered this victory and should be rewarded for his Herculean efforts. But he won’t be, in large part because he is too “centrist” (read: conservative) for most of his party’s caucus. Emanuel had wanted the majority whip’s job, which would have made him the third-ranking member in the House. But he didn’t get it, because Pelosi wanted it to go to someone else, the far more liberal Jim Clyburn. Emanuel will instead have to be satisfied with the Number-4 job in the House, House Democratic Caucus Chairman. And before any of you go suggesting that that’s not a big deal, that Emanuel only got bumped one spot, and that he will still be in the House leadership, we dare you to name the current Republican equivalent . . . Yeah. That’s what we thought. (By the way, it’s Deborah Pryce).

Likewise, Pelosi is going to prevent centrist Jane Harman, the ranking member on the House Intelligence Committee, from taking the chairman’s gavel in January, preferring instead to go with liberal Alcee Hastings. Hastings, it should be noted, is one of only a handful of federal judges in the nation’s history ever to be impeached (for corruption) and removed from the bench. So much for cleaning up the “cesspool” of corruption and governing from the center.

Now, if it were just Clyburn and Hastings, one might be able to argue that Pelosi has simply made a couple exceptions to the rule. But it’s not just Clyburn and Hastings. In fact, Pelosi is backing a challenge to moderate Steny Hoyer (the current minority whip) for the majority leader’s job, throwing her weight behind Jack Murtha, the darling of the far-left. Murtha, you may recall, is the guy who back in 1980 told the ABSCAM decoys that he wasn’t “interested . . . at this point” in their measly \$50,000 bribe and who avoided prosecution by testifying against his fellow Democrat Frank Thompson.

Of course, what Murtha is most famous for these days is his plan to run away from . . . er . . . “redeploy” troops out of Iraq. Which brings us to . . .

The Lessons of Vietnam. We’ve written this so many times over the past couple of years that you should all know it by heart by now. If we were country music singers we would hold out the microphone to you, our audience, and expect you to be able to sing the refrain for us.

The American people do not want to have their sons, daughter, husbands, and wives slaughtered on foreign soil. But they are more than willing to make that sacrifice, *if it is not made in vain*. Americans did not want to lose Vietnam. And they do not want to lose Iraq. Indeed, they want to win Iraq. They just don’t want soldiers dying there for no reason and while no visible progress is being made.

The Boomer Democrats still insist that they stopped the Vietnam War, but the only guy who ran on an overtly anti-war platform lost 98% of the states. Moreover, the American people didn’t give up on Vietnam because they bought the liberals’ line about the war’s inherent injustice. They gave up because the policymakers didn’t have the resolve to win. If anything, the left’s role in Vietnam backfired on it, and has haunted the Democratic Party for three-plus decades, cementing its reputation as weak on defense.

The Democrats continue to misread the American public on Iraq, just as they did on Vietnam. The American public is unquestionably unhappy, but mostly because the United States is losing. Prematurely conceding defeat is not exactly the way for Democrats to endear themselves to this unhappy public or to ensure that their majority will last more than a couple years. Yet that is what many in the party appear to want to do.

This week, the aforementioned presidential-loser-supreme, George McGovern, will meet with the House Progressive Caucus to discuss the best way to achieve defeat. And while the Progressive Caucus may not speak for the party, it does have over 60 members, which means that at least one quarter of the Democrats in the new House majority are openly courting ignominious defeat.

As for the Democratic leaders, they too seem to crave American defeat, since they have apparently decided to push forward with their plans for the setting of timetables and “phased withdrawal,” the euphemism-of-the-week for surrender. If they pursue this course, there is an excellent chance that *they* will repeat the mistakes of Vietnam and thereby solidify their status as the party of capitulators.

The only hope Democrats have on the Iraq issue is that President Bush will pre-empt their surrender by launching one of his own. As we note in the piece above, we are not particularly optimistic that the President will do the right thing on Iraq, which will, of course, make it easier for the Democrats to do the wrong thing as well.

We wish there was more reason to be optimistic, but we just do not see it. We could still be surprised, of course. President Bush may prove the naysayers wrong again. And Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid may prove to be far wiser and more adept political operatives than we anticipate. We won’t hold our breath in either case. But we won’t give up hope completely either. The lessons are all there for these guys to learn. We only wonder if they will.

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