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Surging To Defeat In Iraq

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As Robert Gates takes the helm at the Pentagon today, he is probably already aware that Vice President Dick Cheney and President George W. Bush are resolute in their decision to stay the course in Iraq (without using those words) for the next two years. What he probably does not realize is that the U.S. military is about to commit hara-kiri.

The media are abuzz with trial balloons with official leaks that President George W. Bush is about to approve a "surge" in U.S. troop strength in Iraq by tens of thousands. At the same time, surge advocate Sen. Lindsay Graham, R-S.C., just back from a brief visit to the Green Zone with fellow surgeons John McCain, R-Ariz., and Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., has warned that "the amount of troops will make no difference" if Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki avoids taking "bold" moves. The three pretend to be unaware that the most important move for which they pressed—breaking with radical Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr—would amount to political suicide for Maliki.

Meanwhile, back at the Sunday talk shows, incoming Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., who owes his position to the popular revolt in November against the war, said he can "go along" with a surge, but only for two to three months and only as part of a broader strategy to bring combat forces home by early 2008. Meanwhile, says Reid, Democrats will "give the military anything they want."

Can Reid be oblivious to the reality that this has to do with the next two years—not the next two months? Former Army vice chief of staff Gen. Jack Keane, one of the anointed retired generals who have Bush's ear, is urging him to send 30,000 to 40,000 more troops and has already dismissed the possibility of a time-frame shorter than one and a half years. What seems clear is that the president is determined that the war not be lost while he is in office. But events are moving too fast for that. It was not quite the way he meant it, but Bush has gotten one thing right; there will indeed be no "graceful exit." That goes in spades, if he sends still more troops.

Oxymoron

A generation from now, our grandchildren will have difficulty writing history papers on this oxymoronic debate on how to surge/withdraw our troops into/from the quagmire in Iraq. Historians will have just as much trouble, especially those given to Tolstoy's theory that history is ruled by an inexorable determinism in which the free choice of major historical figures plays a minimal role. Tolstoy died before events put into perspective the legacy of Tsar Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat [Decider] Of All The Russias, and his Vice President/éminence grise, Rasputin.

Judging from President Bush's behavior in recent weeks, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he may be no more stable than Nicholas II. And if retired Col. Larry Wilkerson, Colin Powell's top aide at the State Department, is right in saying that Bush still has the "vice president whispering in his ear every moment," we have an unhappy but apt historical analogy.

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But, you protest, the generals most intimately involved in Iraq, John Abizaid and George Casey, and Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker have made no secret of their strong reservations about sending large numbers of additional troops. That is correct, but also irrelevant. Because, as was the case in the Vietnam War, our top generals have long since morphed into careerists and politicians. They have become accustomed to looking up for the next reward—and not down at the troops who bear the brunt of their acquiescence in political/military decisions that make no sense.

But what about Senators Joe Biden and Ted Kennedy—and Colin Powell, and even Donald Rumsfeld, all of whom spoke out yesterday against a sizable surge in troop strength in Iraq? No problem. Cheney/Bush is the sole “decider.”

This does not mean that Defense Secretary Robert Gates should renege on his promise to visit the troops in Iraq and hear the generals out. It does mean that by the time he gets there, the generals can be expected to be already “on board with the program,” as they say. And taking issue with “deciders” has never been Gates’ strong suit.

What Gates may not realize, but the generals should, is that once an “all or nothing” offensive like the “surge” contemplated has begun, there is no turning back. It will be “victory” over the insurgents and the Shia militias or palpable defeat, recognizable by all in Iraq and across the world.

Stalingrad on the Tigris

A “surge” of the size possible under current constraints on U.S. forces will not turn the tide in the guerrilla war. Reinforcement of Bagdad several thousand U.S. troops last summer simply brought on more violence. Those who believe still more troops will bring “victory” are living in a dangerous dream world and need to wake up.

Moreover, major reinforcement would commit the US Army and Marine Corps to decisive combat in which there are no more strategic reserves to be sent to the front. It will be a matter of win or die in the attempt. In that situation, everyone in uniform on the ground will commit every ounce of their being to a hope of “victory,” and few measures will be shrunk from.

Analogies come to mind: the Bulge, Stalingrad, the Battle of Algiers. It will be total war with all the likelihood of excesses and mass casualties that come with total war.

To take up such a strategy and force our armed forces into it would be an immoral course of action, both for our troops and for the thousands more Iraqis bound to die.

Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., spoke for many of us last Thursday on the Senate floor:

“I, for one, am at the end of my rope when it comes to supporting a policy that has our soldiers patrolling the same streets in the same way, being blown up by the same bombs day after day. That is absurd. It may even be criminal. I cannot support that anymore.”

Yesterday, when George Stephanopoulos asked Smith what he meant by “criminal,” he replied:

“I said it. You can use any adjective you want, George. But I have long believed in a military context, when you do the same thing over and over again, without a clear strategy for victory, at the expense of your young people in arms, that is dereliction. That is deeply immoral.”

If adopted, the “surge” strategy will be even worse than that. It will be something we will spend a generation living down.

