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Bush, Marriage, and Iraq

by Thomas Kearney

The headline on the front page of the January 14, 2004, edition of the *New York Times* read, “Bush Plans \$1.5 Billion Drive for Promotion of Marriage.” According to administration officials, the money would be used to train couples to develop interpersonal skills in order to sustain “healthy marriages.” This from a president who belongs to the Republican Party, the party that once claimed to stand for limited government and fiscal discipline. Bush’s proposal is further proof that “compassionate conservatism” is just a euphemism for big-government conservatism. With federal budget deficits spiraling out of control, the amount Bush wants to spend on his latest initiative brings to mind the late Sen. Everett Dirksen, who once remarked, “A billion here and a billion there, and soon you’re talking real money.”

But one need not read the *Times* article much further before learning the *raison d’être* for Bush’s interest in using the resources of the federal government to bestow the blessings of healthy marriages on the American people. “This is a way for the president to address the concerns of conservatives and to solidify his conservative base,” a presidential advisor is quoted as saying. In other words, President Bush wants to use tax dollars forcibly taken from American citizens to fund programs whose effectiveness cannot be measured, in order to mollify the “family values” wing of the Republican Party. It is a classic example of robbing Peter to buy the votes of Paul.

One does not have to be a seer to predict what will happen with Bush’s marriage initiative if it is implemented. If divorce rates begin to decline a few years from now and out-of-wedlock births continue their downward trend, conservatives will point to the statistics as proof that the programs work and are a good use of taxpayer money and that spending even more money will bring even better results. But if the stats show very little change, supporters can be counted on to argue that it demonstrates the need for even more money to surmount the problem.

If the Democrats call for abolishing federally funded marriage programs because of their ineffectiveness, conservative Republicans will predictably respond by accusing the Democrats of being against marriage and traditional families. Thus, federal programs to strengthen marriage

will become sanctified, just as Bush and big-government conservatives have already sanctified Bill Clinton's AmeriCorps program as exemplifying the spirit of national service in America.

Left unsaid by the *Times* article, and probably even overlooked by those who might oppose Bush's marriage initiative, is the tremendous damage already inflicted on the marriages of those serving in the U.S. armed forces by the president's greatest policy blunder — his decision to invade Iraq nearly a year ago. It is no secret that the terrible weapons of mass destruction that Bush used as his fig leaf for justifying the invasion of Iraq have not been found and probably did not even exist. No concrete evidence has turned up that Saddam Hussein provided any support to al-Qaeda or had anything to do with 9/11. The degraded condition of Iraq's infrastructure and the fact that the Iraqi army, with the exception of the Fedayeen Saddam fighters, largely melted away in the face of the U.S. army's advance make ludicrous the claim that Iraq posed a threat to the United States and the world, let alone to Saddam Hussein's neighbors.

There are approximately 130,000 American military personnel in Iraq currently overseeing the occupation of that country and its transition to a post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi government. Anyone who reads the newspapers or watches the news programs on television knows that American soldiers are under attack on a daily basis. Since the war began, 500 American soldiers have been killed and at least several thousand wounded, with most of the casualties inflicted after President Bush declared an end to major combat operations on May 1, 2003. Some of those who were killed or seriously wounded were men who had wives and children.

It takes only a few minutes to search the Internet to put faces and names on the dead and maimed. Anyone can go to the website for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to read the profiles of the dead at www.ajc.com/news/content/news/iraq/casualties. Among the fallen who were married and had children are:

Army Pvt. Shawn Pahnke, killed by a sniper on June 16, 2003. Private Pahnke was able to listen over the phone as his wife gave birth to their son on March 20, 2003. That is the closest Private Pahnke ever got to being in the same room with little Dean Pahnke.

Marine Lance Cpl. Donald John Cline was killed in combat on March 23, 2003. Though only 21 years old at the time of his death, he left behind a wife and two sons, one 2 years old and the other 7 months old.

Army Staff Sgt. Daniel Bader, 28 years old, was one of 16 soldiers killed on November 2, 2003 when the helicopter he was riding in was downed. Ironically, the chopper was carrying troops who were to be sent home on leave from Iraq. Sergeant Bader had a wife and a daughter, who is now 14 months old.

The *Journal-Constitution* quotes Bader's wife, Tiffany: "It hasn't hit me yet, that I'm not going to have a husband. That I'm a widow at 30. That my little girl is going to be raised without a father."

Then there are those who have been wounded. They include Sgt. John Adams of Florida, who was wounded during an ambush on August 29, 2003. Sergeant Adams was featured in a segment on ABC's *Nightline*. Before his injuries, he was a part-time soldier who worked in the lawn-care business. An explosion left pieces of shrapnel and fragments of bone in his brain. As a result, his speech is halting and garbled, and his wife, Summer, must help him with the most basic of tasks. Sergeant Adams says the fragments cannot be removed, "because if they operate then they will have to take half the brain out." Summer Adams admits, "I'm so tired. I'm lucky if I get a full night's sleep now. I can't. It's very stressful."

Supporters of the war in Iraq would very likely say that while these examples are tragic, they are no different than what happens in any war. But what if these soldiers were killed or wounded in a war that did not need to be fought? The latest addition to the arsenal of opponents of Bush's decision to invade Iraq is a report published by Jeffrey Record for the Army War College. Professor Record concludes that Iraq "was a war-of-choice distraction from the war of necessity against al-Qaeda."

Since all of the justifications put forth by the Bush administration and its supporters have been proven baseless, at least in the minds of those who believe the invasion of Iraq was a bad idea, the one argument the Iraq hawks have left to fall back on is that Saddam Hussein was an evil despot who oppressed his people. One need not be a supporter of Bush's Iraq policy to agree that Saddam Hussein is a monster. But that does not provide sufficient justification for the United States to shoulder the burden in lives, money, and squandered international goodwill, to forcibly remove him from power. The United States military exists to protect the American people. Its phone number is not 1-800-DEPOSE-A-DICTATOR.

After having committed the United States to spending hundreds of billions of dollars to transform Iraq into a democracy, President Bush wants to spend another \$1.5 billion to strengthen the institution of marriage here in America. It is doubtful that any of that money will be spent to ease the burden of Summer Adams in taking care of her wounded husband or to recompense Tiffany Bader and her daughter, who will grow up never having known her father. Who can say what positive impact that \$1.5 billion will have on anyone's marriage in the future? What we do know is that there have been many marriages already destroyed by President Bush's reckless decision to send 130,000 American men and women in uniform to invade Iraq and fight an unnecessary war.

Thomas Kearney is a libertarian residing in Plainview, New York.

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