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Are We Electing a Military Ruler or a President

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Amidst all the hubbub among the Democratic Party candidates for president over who supported President Bush's invasion of Iraq and who didn't, have you noticed that not one of them has brought up the Constitution and, specifically, the constitutional requirement that the president secure a congressional declaration of war as a prerequisite to waging war?

No; while some of Democrats are supporting the president's judgment in attacking a sovereign and independent nation that had not attacked or threatened to attack the United States, and while others are questioning his judgment, none of them is questioning his claim of omnipotent power to send the entire nation into war solely on the basis of his own initiative. After all, don't forget that even though the Congress enacted a resolution in which it delegated its power to declare war to the president (unconstitutionally, I might add), the president made it very clear that he didn't need such authorization. While he welcomed congressional support, he consistently said, the decision to declare war was his and his alone.

But isn't the omnipotent power to send a nation into war traditionally characteristic of societies suffering under dictatorial regimes?

Moreover, how many of the Democratic candidates are questioning the power claimed by the president to order U.S. military personnel to seize, incarcerate, and punish American citizens without according them due process of law, the right to an attorney, or a jury trial? Aren't they all simply saying, "Elect me because I can be trusted to wield such power better than all the other candidates"?

But isn't the omnipotent power to jail and punish people traditionally characteristic of societies suffering under dictatorial regimes?

Some of the candidates seem to think that they're actually running more for U.S. military commander in chief than president of the United States. Suggesting that he would make a better commander in chief than President Bush, John Kerry continues to emphasize his combat experience in the Vietnam War more than 30 years ago. That in turn caused Wesley Clark to remind people that he was much more qualified to be elected commander in chief because he is a

general, while Kerry was simply a lowly lieutenant. Clark then became embroiled in a controversy over the suggestion of one of his supporters that President Bush was an army deserter for having joined the National Guard as a way of getting out of being sent to Vietnam and then having failed to attend the monthly meetings of his Guard unit.

But isn't the importance of military rank and combat experience traditionally characteristic of societies suffering under dictatorial regimes?

Since the assumption is that war is now perpetual for the American people, whether it's the war on terror, drugs, crime, or whatever, the election cry among the candidates can be reduced to "Elect me because I'm the best soldier to lead us in these wars."

But aren't perpetual wars and crises traditionally characteristic of societies suffering under dictatorial regimes?

Given the general direction in which our nation is now headed — a direction that more resembles the Soviet Union than the America of our ancestors — I suppose it's only natural for the political process to attract military-minded people to run for president. After all, if things keep going the way they are, we'll have troops not only in airports but also in bus and train stations and at highway checkpoints. Heck, we might even witness the spectacle of troops sealing our borders to fingerprint and protect us from outsiders. Why, we might even get to see our newest tanks and armored personnel carriers in our Fourth of July freedom parades. All just as in the Soviet Union.

Despite all the customary political fanfare that comes every four years, the critical choice facing the American people is not whom to elect as their next commander in chief. It's whether to replace the current paradigm of perpetual war, empire, militarism, and omnipotent government that holds our nation in its grip with a different paradigm based on liberty, peace, republic, and constitutionally limited government. Once the new paradigm replaces the old, we'll be once again be voting for president rather than commander in chief.

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