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In Iraq Zero Plus Zero Is More than Zero **by Sheldon Richman**

Lately, it sounds as if Americans need to continue dying in Iraq because otherwise the previous deaths will be meaningless. George W. Bush says, “These brave men and women gave their lives for a cause that is just and necessary for the security of our country, and now we will honor their sacrifice by completing their mission.” If the cause were really just and necessary, completing the mission would not be a matter of honoring those killed in it. The mission would stand on its own two feet. It can’t do that, however, because the feet are made of clay.

This is an odd sort of calculus: zero plus zero is greater than zero. It is the calculus of a man at wit’s end, who can’t admit he made a big mistake. Understandably, the American people are increasingly perplexed. Once again, we are cutting off our nose to save face.

Yet we are still said to be fighting in Iraq for the sake of freedom — the Iraqis’ and ours. Can any sense be made of that? The untold thousands of Iraqis who have been killed in this war will not be enjoying their freedom. The maimed will find themselves rather hampered in that regard. The same goes for the 1,800 Americans killed and thousands whose lives have been permanently misshapen by bullets and bombs, first to destroy nonexistent weapons, then to bring freedom and democracy to a land that Terry Michael in the *Washington Times* called “a Hatfield-McCoy style tribal culture, heavily influenced by politicized religious fanatics whose world view never made it past the 8th century, let alone the Enlightenment, and who want theocracy, not liberty.”

While all this is going on, war planners behind the scenes confess that things aren’t going as well as the president would have us believe. Of course the people can’t be allowed to know this. We might begin to entertain the notion that quick withdrawal makes the most sense. The war council does not really need to fear this. As Michael points out, the news media are well enough “housebroken” that they will never facilitate an explicit debate about the Iraqi quagmire.

Yet facts do leak out. *The Washington Post* reports, “The Bush administration is significantly lowering expectations of what can be achieved in Iraq, recognizing that the United States will have to settle for far less progress than originally envisioned during the transition due

to end in four months, according to U.S. officials in Washington and Baghdad.” The *Post* goes on: “The United States no longer expects to see a model new democracy, a self-supporting oil industry or a society in which the majority of people are free from serious security or economic challenges, U.S. officials say.”

The *Post* quotes an unnamed official confessing that the administration is “shedding the unreality that dominated at the beginning.” This official is on the same team that once claimed that *it* created reality.

It would be amazing if this secret scaling back of expectations were not going on. After all, Iraqi barbers are getting killed for shaving customers and giving them western-style haircuts. Women in the Shi’ite areas cannot walk around unescorted. Kurdish and Shi’ite militias rule the north and south. Insurgents slaughter security forces at will. The constitutional process is foundering — as if anyone could seriously believe that a liberal constitution could emerge in a cut-and-paste country that has not undergone the requisite liberal cultural evolution. The White House is reduced to saying that democracy can take many forms. That looks like a blank check.

“We set out to establish a democracy, but we’re slowly realizing we will have some form of Islamic republic,” an official told the *Post*. So we have traded a brutal *secular* dictatorship for an Iran-style theocracy — which will be allied with Iran. People died for this. Anyone who can find sense in that must believe that zero plus zero is greater than zero.

Amid all this the president finds time to relax. “I think it’s also important for me to go on with my life,” he says. Lucky him.

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This article was originally published in August 2005.