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## **Is Any War Civil? by Sheldon Richman**

Whether Iraq is embroiled in a civil war is a matter of some controversy. News organizations such as NBC have dramatically announced that, indeed, it is. Pundits solemnly debate the question on cable news talk shows. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell says yes. Present Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice says no.

Of course, the president of the United States agrees with Rice. He has two good reasons for doing so. If President Bush admits we have a civil war on our hands, the American people will (1) know that the Bush doctrine is a big flop, and (2) wonder why we should stay in Iraq.

So what sounds like a debate over semantics is really a matter of politics.

For the record, the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “civil war” as a “war between factions or regions of the same country.” If that’s not what is going on in Iraq, then what is going on?

The mental contortions being undertaken by the Bush administration on this question are pitiful. The president’s press secretary, Tony Snow, denied a civil war is going on in Iraq because a civil war is a situation in which “people break up into clearly identifiable feuding sides clashing for supremacy within the land.”

Huh?

But here’s something more outrageous: Snow said that in contrast to Iraq, a good example of a civil war is what happened in the United States from 1861 and 1865. Really? Although that conflict is called the Civil War, in fact it does not satisfy Snow’s definition. In no sense were there “clearly identifiable feuding sides clashing for *supremacy within the land*.” Northerners and Southerners were not fighting over who would control the government of the United States. Eleven southern states had tried to leave the Union and become their own country, the Confederate States of America. President Lincoln declared the secession illegal and went to war to prevent it. Whatever you think of the justice of one side or the other, it was not a civil war.

In the end, it doesn’t matter whether Iraq is having a civil war nor not. In either case that country is in a situation that the U.S. presence can only make worse. Why? Because the U.S.

military is a foreign occupier, and it is perceived as such. Polls show that the Iraqis do not want American troops there. A strong majority says it's okay to kill Americans. How can we justify even one more day there?

The stupidity of the Bush policy becomes more obvious every day. (According to a recently leaked memo, outgoing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld seems to agree.) Not only has the policy plunged Iraq into a caldron of violence, it predictably has given Iran what it couldn't achieve on its own: dominance over its next-door neighbor. Considering that Bush regards Iran as the leader of the "axis of evil," his policy looks peculiar indeed.

Bush is so deeply invested in his mistake that he can't even hint that something is gravely wrong. He doggedly insists, against all evidence, that al-Qaeda is the cause of the violence. In public he praises Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as the "right guy for Iraq" while his national security advisor writes memos calling Maliki ignorant, dishonest, or incompetent.

Everything about the Bush policy is an insult to the intelligence of the American people. If the opinion polling is accurate, the people aren't as stupid as the administration thinks.

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