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Bush's Doublethink **by Sheldon Richman**

The most peculiar passage in President Bush's much-dissected "surge" speech was this: "I have made it clear to the prime minister [Nouri al-Maliki] and Iraq's other leaders that America's commitment is not open-ended. If the Iraqi government does not follow through on its promises, it will lose the support of the American people."

What could the president have meant by that? On one level it's a waste of time to even ask the question. Bush says what he needs to say in order to justify whatever it is he wants to do. The standard isn't truth and logic but appearance. How will it look to the American people and, presumably, historians far in the future?

But on another level it profits us to examine his words, for they measure how deeply this administration insults the intelligence of the American people. Judging by the polls, they aren't falling for it.

"America's commitment is not open-ended." No? So may we assume that if al-Maliki and his government don't fulfill certain conditions, Bush is ready to withdraw American forces and bring them home? That's the implication — except he can't really mean that. He has spent too much time lecturing us that Iraq is the central front in his "war on terror," "the decisive ideological struggle of our time," and that failure would be catastrophic for America.

If that's all true, how could he pull out simply because the Iraqi government isn't making nice with the Sunnis? (How could al-Maliki do it anyway? His brutal patron Muqtada al-Sadr wouldn't stand for it.)

And don't you think al-Maliki knows Bush can't withdraw? He hears Bush's speeches, too, and he's no dummy. So in fact he has Bush over a barrel.

So which is it? Is Iraq a place the United States can't afford to leave? Or is leaving a threat credible enough to force al-Maliki to shape up? There's a third possibility: Bush may practice Orwellian doublethink, the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at once, never letting himself see that both can't be true.

As for losing the support of the American people, Frank Rich of the *New York Times* had it right: “Since that support vanished long ago, it’s hard to imagine an emptier threat or a more naked confession of American impotence, all the more pathetic in a speech rattling sabers against Syria and Iran.”

Perhaps I’ve misinterpreted Bush and that it’s not withdrawal that he’s threatening al-Maliki with. Perhaps he’s threatening something else: regime change. That’s actually the only Plan B consistent with Bush’s apocalyptic line. Al-Maliki might want to watch his back — and read a biography of Ngo Dinh Diem, the assassinated first president of the Republic of Vietnam.

Does anything the administration says add up? “Surge” may be the word du jour, but what Bush intends is not a surge, just a plain old phased-in increase in troops. A small one at that, considering what the neoconservative hawks think is needed for victory. It all has the feel of a face-saving operation designed to kick the can up the road until January 20, 2009.

And notice the lack of talk about democracy. It has fallen into the memory hole. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went to Egypt the other day she didn’t mention democracy or the rule of law. As the *New York Times* reported, “It was clear that the United States — facing chaos in Iraq, rising Iranian influence and the destabilizing Israeli-Palestinian conflict — had decided that stability, not democracy, was its priority, Egyptian political commentators, political aides and human rights advocates said.” The Egyptian strongman, Hosni Mubarak, can do stability. Maybe he’s available for service in Iraq.

Then there’s Iran and Bush’s open threats. Did he really not know that taking out the barrier to Iran’s expansion would pave the way for its regional hegemony? Does anyone think a move or two ahead in that administration?

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