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Know When to Fold ‘Em **by Sheldon Richman**

Hawks such as Sen. John McCain who oppose Senate resolutions against the so-called troop surge in Iraq make a pernicious argument. Such a resolution “is basically a vote of no confidence in the men and women we are sending over there,” McCain said. “We’re saying, ‘We’re sending you — we’re not going to stop you from going there, but we don’t believe you can succeed.’”

McCain is right in one respect: The senators who oppose the escalation should be doing more than pushing a nonbinding resolution. They should be doing everything they can to stop President Bush’s war, even if that requires a constitutional confrontation with the executive branch.

But McCain and his ilk go further than pointing out an inconsistency in the Democratic chicken-doves. They think no one should ever say that U.S. troops cannot prevail in Iraq or in any other military mission.

If they really believe this, they display the mentality of a fanatical nationalist and imperialist. It hardly recommends one for the presidency.

Why would someone think the U.S. military can prevail in any and every conflict? Surely we can imagine situations in which the most awesome military power cannot “win” because those situations are not essentially military in nature. Iraq appears to be such situation. It is a country with deep-seated, multidimensional sectarian and political conflicts. If we define “win” in some constructive way, how can a U.S. force, ham-handed and oblivious to the subtleties of the local cultures, possibly win? Even if we loosen the definition of victory to include imposing order at all cost, it is unlikely to be accomplished no matter how many troops are sent and no matter how unspeakable the violence. Guerrilla warriors have many times humbled great powers. The Shias and Sunnis in Iraq are highly motivated, and they have the home-field advantage. What offsetting advantage do invading and occupying troops have against that?

You can get a clue to the mentality of the hawks by realizing that if any other country were doing the invading and occupying, they might agree with this analysis. But they make an

exception for the United States. It's as though all the rules are suspended when the U.S. government is the perpetrator. It can always win — if only we have the will. But our will is undermined when “defeatists” say we can't win. This is the Bush-McCain position.

One should not have to point out that the rules are not different for the United States. Awesome military power does not qualify a government for exemption. It just seems to make the government dumb. When all you have is a hammer, all problems look like nails.

Belief in U.S. omnipotence is fueled by the conviction that there is something uniquely good and right about America. But here things get jumbled. What is “America”? The American founding had much that was unique and noble about it, specifically its libertarian elements. Americans do many noble things, including producing an unprecedented amount of wealth. But what does this have to do with America's war-making politicians? Nothing whatsoever. There is nothing noble or unique about them.

Since the end of World War II the U.S. power elite have pursued a program of world dominance based on the doctrine that only America's leaders were enlightened enough to bring order to the benighted masses — by force if necessary. Not coincidentally, this program was also good for major corporate interests. President Eisenhower called the arrangement the military-industrial complex. It has not been good for the world. Nor has it been good for Americans, since it has put them at risk from the people their government has wronged.

Bravado and messianism won't turn the loss in Iraq into a win. Bush, McCain, and the other hawks should know when to fold. A defeat for them would be the real victory for America.

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