



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

What's to Lose? **by Sheldon Richman**

The other day President Bush charged the congressional Democrats with wanting to “legislate defeat” in Iraq.

It's a standard political ploy to smear one's opponents, but maybe we should follow this line of thought (if that's not too dignified a word) and see where it leads.

What would an American defeat in Iraq mean? Would evil Iraqis conquer the United States, force us all to speak Arabic, and convert us to Islam? Hardly. There is no threat whatsoever to the American people from the sectarian fighters in Baghdad or elsewhere in that country. Even the Iraqis who form the local al-Qaeda chapter have no designs on the United States. Indeed, they have their hands full in their own country. And their hands would be even fuller if the United States should withdraw. Even most Sunnis in Iraq despise the al-Qaeda types and their brutal methods. If anything holds the disparate Sunni factions together, it's their common animosity to the U.S. occupation.

So in what sense would “we” lose? From the standpoint of the American people, it would be no loss at all. Rather, it would be a victory. How so? Because we are losing now! Americans are killed every week, and the wounded are scarred for life. Respect for America in the world sinks lower with each Iraqi death and mutilation. Like the empires before it, America today looks like a pitiful Gulliver tied down in Lilliput, essentially powerless against a disparate and decentralized occupation resistance.

We are also losing several billion dollars a month. Billions! That is money down a rat hole.

By stopping those losses, American would win. Families would have their loved ones back; no one would be threatened with being shipped to the meat grinder overseas, and billions of dollars could be left in the taxpayers' pockets. That sounds like a victory not a loss.

But there would be losers, make no mistake. President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney would be losers. They could no longer go on with their charade that the war was just and wise or that things are going well despite what our own eyes tell us. The losers would include the gang of neoconservatives who envision America as a “benevolent hegemon,” a good empire that is

indispensable to bringing order and enlightenment to the benighted people of the globe. This Theodore Roosevelt worldview was always a cover for the projection of raw power. While it was rationalized as a way to make Americans safe in an unruly world, we can see clearly now that it has done the opposite. It has created terrorists and the rationale for terrorism. Even the government admits that terrorism is on the rise. The terrorist risk to Americans was always small, but if anything, the neocon strategy has made the risk larger not smaller.

Other losers will be the government contractors who have made out like bandits in this war. While wars are not typically fought primarily for the profit of contractors, that economic consideration is an ever-present ingredient in the mix. Nor should we overlook the oil motive. U.S. policy in the Middle East has always had oil security as a major objective. It's appropriate to regard the military budget as partly a subsidy to the oil industry, since some of its costs are socialized through the tax system. The American people may pay lower gasoline prices because of this subsidy, but maybe they'd prefer higher prices and lower taxes instead.

Finally, the losers will be anyone else who prefers empire to republicanism, limits on government power, and freedom.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine.*

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