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## **Winning Is Losing** **by Sheldon Richman**

It's amazing what passes for news these days. Two Brookings Institution "liberals" who favored the invasion of Iraq before it occurred and have since led the war-cheerleading section are now getting attention for writing on the *New York Times* op-ed page that if the Bush administration stays the course, this is "[A War We Might Just Win](#)."

Wow. Stop the presses.

Michael E. O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at Brookings, and Kenneth M. Pollack, director of research at its Saban Center for Middle East Policy, claim that the war opponents "seem unaware of the significant changes taking place.... We are finally getting somewhere in Iraq, at least in military terms."

They concede that the "Bush administration has over four years lost essentially all credibility." But that doesn't keep them from stating, "How much longer should American troops keep fighting and dying to build a new Iraq while Iraqi leaders fail to do their part? And how much longer can we wear down our forces in this mission? These haunting questions underscore the reality that the surge cannot go on forever. But there is enough good happening on the battlefields of Iraq today that Congress should plan on sustaining the effort at least into 2008."

O'Hanlon and Pollack portray themselves as harsh critics of the administration's handling of the war, but Glenn Greenwald at Salon.com shows that this is untrue. O'Hanlon has repeatedly both praised President Bush's strategic decisions and predicted victory. In 2002 Pollack wrote *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*. That these guys now see the light at the end of the tunnel — after an eight-day guided tour of Iraq — should impress no one.

The passage quoted above contains the key to the problem: "How much longer should American troops keep fighting and dying to build a new Iraq?" Why should *any* American die to build a new Iraq? That's for the Iraqis to take care of. Only imperial aspirations make it America's business.

It comes as no surprise that O’Hanlon and Pollack do not include Iraqi deaths in their question. But it should be asked, How much longer should Iraqis die while America tries to the build the Iraq it wants Iraq to be? That puts a different light on the subject.

The important question is not, Can America win? but, What does “win” mean and would it be good for the American people? Winning would mean the success of a blatantly imperial mission that violates the tenets of limited government. Iraq did not attack or threaten the American people. It didn’t even have the leftovers of the so-called weapons of mass destruction the Reagan administration furnished Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, when the United States backed him in his aggressive war against Iran. Thus, the current war was unprovoked and unrelated to defense, motivated by a Bush administration desire to rid the Middle East of any possible rival who could deter its activities there. Once Saddam stopped being “our” tyrant, he had to go. WMDs, UN resolutions, and no-fly-zone violations were convenient rationalizations.

A victory would be taken by the administration and perhaps the American people as a sign that the United States can indeed assume the role of imperial policeman. As a result, policymakers will be emboldened and the neoconservative advocates of “benevolent hegemony” will be back in full voice. The table will be set for the next war. In Iran or Pakistan, perhaps?

But this just begins to describe the troubles that victory would bring. Imperial occupiers always are targets of “terrorists,” which is what the strong call the weak. Unfortunately, people who engage in terrorism (not unlike people who direct great standing armies) kill and injure innocent people. We like to distinguish terrorists who target civilians from governments that drop bombs from 30,000 feet knowing they will kill civilians, but is that distinction really worth making?

The issue is not whether the occupying U.S. force can pacify Iraq. Maybe it can — for a while. What’s important is that a victory for the Bush administration will be a defeat for the American people, and vice versa.

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