



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

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

One Hundred Years in Iraq? **by Sheldon Richman**

John McCain, the Republican candidate for president who dubiously claims the status of war hero because he was imprisoned and beaten after bombing civilian targets in North Vietnam 40 years ago, apparently wants other young men to have the chance to become war heroes.

He continues to be dogged by a remark he made in January during the New Hampshire primary. At a town meeting a man asked McCain what he thought of President Bush's statement that U.S. forces could be in Iraq for 50 years.

"Maybe 100!" McCain said. "We've been in Japan for 60 years. We've been in South Korea for 50 years or so. That would be fine with me as long as Americans are not being injured or harmed or wounded or killed. It's fine with me — I hope it'd be fine with you — if we maintain a presence in a very volatile part of the world where al-Qaeda is training, recruiting, and equipping and motivating people every single day."

Later, McCain amplified his position in response to questions from David Corn of Mother Jones:

"After the event ended, I asked McCain about his 'hundred years' comment, and he reaffirmed the remark, excitedly declaring that U.S. troops could be in Iraq for 'a thousand years' or 'a million years,' as far as he was concerned. The key matter, he explained, was whether they were being killed or not: 'It's not American presence; it's American casualties'"

(<http://tinyurl.com/yu639c>).

Since then, McCain's critics have used this statement to demonize the senator. McCain and his allies have cried foul. Are the critics out of line?

I don't think so. Sen. Hillary Clinton accurately summarized McCain's position: "He said recently he could see having troops in Iraq for 100 years." Sen. Barack Obama put some spin into his summary, but was certainly in the ballpark, "Senator McCain said the other day that we might be mired for 100 years in Iraq — which is reason enough not to give him four years in the White House" (<http://tinyurl.com/2b4bdz>).

McCain is wrong about al-Qaeda in Iraq. By nearly all accounts, it is a minor element in the country, largely despised by its fellow Sunni Muslims. Moreover, the group wasn't even in the country until the United States invaded. Saddam Hussein distrusted Osama bin Laden. Before 2003 an al-Qaeda operative was in northern Iraq, but that was the semi-autonomous Kurdish region that Saddam did not control.

Nevertheless, since McCain *believes* al-Qaeda is an important force there, his openness to keeping U.S. troops there for a hundred, a thousand, or a million years in defense of America's interest in the region signifies his openness to continuing war and American casualties — not to mention Iraqi casualties, which seem to count for little in the eyes of Americans.

How can this be if he stresses that a long occupation is acceptable only if no Americans are killed or injured? The answer is that McCain is not likely to end an occupation because of American casualties. He attacks the Democrats for wanting to do this now, so he could hardly follow that course himself. His real point, which he has said on other occasions, is that the American people would not object to a long occupation if there are no casualties.

Thus it is no exaggeration to say that McCain would accept 100 years of bloody occupation if that is what it took to win in his view. The Democrats' charge against him is true.

Oddly, last November McCain seemed to understand the implications of a long-term occupation when he appeared on Charlie Rose's television program and expressed opposition to a long-term occupation even if there were no casualties.

ROSE: Do you think that this — Korea, South Korea is an analogy of where Iraq might be, not in terms of their economic success but in terms of an American presence over the next, say, 20, 25 years, that we will have a significant amount of troops there?

McCAIN: I don't think so.

ROSE: Even if there are no casualties?

McCAIN: No. But I can see an American presence for a while. But eventually I think *because of the nature of the society in Iraq and the religious aspects of it* that America eventually withdraws [emphasis added; <http://tinyurl.com/38hvlf>].

Note his reference to the nature of Iraqi society and its religious aspects. McCain seems to be saying that the Iraqis will never accept a U.S force and that therefore America perhaps could never count on an occupation without casualties, regardless of what goes on in South Korea.

Which is it, Mr. Straight Talk? Is a long occupation acceptable or not?

*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. Visit his blog "Free Association" at www.sheldonrichman.com.*

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