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“Patriotic Grace” in Support of War Is No Virtue **by Sheldon Richman**

How amazing it is to hear how some people still talk about the U.S. occupation of Iraq at this late date. You’d think even the most naive nationalist would have long ago realized that something is terribly wrong — intrinsically so — with the U.S. “mission” and that calls for “hanging in there” are preposterous. When will the war boosters learn that no one — not even the U.S. government — can manage or reform a society (using that word rather loosely in the case of the ersatz country called Iraq)?

And we still hear those calls, one of the latest coming in late August from *Wall Street Journal* columnist and Reagan hagiographer Peggy Noonan.

Here’s some of what this cloying writer said, with some commentary thrown in:

What will be needed this autumn is a new bipartisan forbearance, a kind of patriotic grace. This is a great deal to hope for. The president should ask for it, and show it.

Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, will report to Congress on Sept. 11. From the latest metrics, it’s clear the surge has gained some ground. It is generally supposed that Gen. Petraeus will paint a picture of recent decreases in violent incidents and increases in safety. In another world, that might be decisive: It’s working, hang on.

Patriotic grace? Many presumptions are packed into that phrase. For example, Noonan is counting on her readers to think that it would somehow be good for “the country” if the Bush administration were to “win” in Iraq. Considering the imperialistic nature of Bush’s invasion, war, and occupation — an initiative that has created more enemies for America — that can hardly be the case. Where is the patriotism in supporting this violence or the autocratic president who is perpetrating it? This president’s credibility is so low when it comes to Iraq that he will get little of anything he asks from the public. (The pusillanimous Congress is another matter.)

What's needed is not unity but debate at the bedrock level. Is war outside the narrow category of defense ever in the interest of the general public?

Measuring “success”

Noonan says “the surge has gained some ground,” but this is highly contentious. Shortly after Noonan’s column appeared, the news services reported that violence outside of Baghdad was up 20 percent over the previous month. Since the troop “surge” is concentrated in Baghdad, where violence has diminished, it’s clear that U.S. policy is simply shifting, not reducing, the so-called insurgency.

Moreover, we should remember that the additional troops President Bush sent to Iraq in the summer were supposed to help the struggling government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to achieve 18 political “benchmarks” set by the U.S. government. But reports from the administration and the Congress have documented that little or no progress has been made in that regard.

In other words, reports of the success of the latest operation are grossly exaggerated. This was driven home after two so-called harsh critics of the Bush policy, Kenneth Pollack and Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, declared in a *New York Times* op-ed that progress was being made in Iraq and that Congress should give the president more time to succeed. This optimistic account was immediately demolished by critics who pointed out that Pollack and O’Hanlon were never critics of Bush’s war and that their assessment came after a tour of Iraq that was carefully guided by the U.S. military. O’Hanlon admitted as much in an interview with Glenn Greenwald of Salon.com.

Although Noonan is hoping for “bipartisan forbearance,” she can’t help but concede that in some ways things don’t look good.

At the same time, it’s clear that what we call Iraq does not wholly share U.S. objectives. We speak of it as a unitary country, but the Kurds are understandably thinking about Kurdistan, the Sunnis see an Iraq they once controlled but that no longer exists, and the Shia — who knows? An Iraq they theocratically and governmentally control, an Iraq given over to Iran? This division is reflected in what we call Iraq’s government in Baghdad. Seen in this way, the non-latest-metrics way, the situation is bleak.

Is she guilty of scientism — the preoccupation with the pseudo-precision of “metrics”? War is one of those things in which “hard data” do not tell the real story. The United States won the daily body counts in Vietnam, let us not forget. What did it mean in the end?

Noonan might have gone in a different direction with her quick allusion to the history of Iraq. This is a country that was pasted together from former Ottoman districts by the British

imperialists after World War I. It took the iron hand of Saddam Hussein (and his predecessors) to hold the disparate parts together. It was entirely predictable that the U.S. overthrow of Saddam would unleash centrifugal forces. So why did Noonan support the invasion and why does she continue to support the occupation, hoping for a U.S. success? Because it's the United States and it is only right that the United States — a “great power” — succeed.

The anti-war movement

She does ask the pro-war crowd to treat their opponents nicer, and for that I'll give her credit.

From the pro-war forces, the surge supporters and those who supported the Iraq invasion from the beginning, what is needed is a new modesty of approach, a willingness to admit it hasn't quite gone according to plan. A moral humility. Not meekness — great powers aren't helped by meekness — but maturity, a shown respect for the convictions of others.

What we often see instead, lately, is the last refuge of the adolescent: defiance. An attitude of *Oh yeah? We're Lincoln, you're McClellan. We care about the troops and you don't. We care about the good Iraqis who cast their lot with us. You'd just as soon they hang from the skids of the last helicopter off the embassy roof.* They have been called thuggish. Is this wholly unfair?

But she's got some advice for the anti-war people too:

The antiwar forces, the surge opponents, the 'I was against it from the beginning' people are, some of them, indulging in grim, and mindless, triumphalism. They show a smirk of pleasure at bad news that has been brought by the other team. Some have a terrible quaking fear that something good might happen in Iraq, that the situation might be redeemed. Their great interest is that Bushism be laid low and the president humiliated. They make lists of those who supported Iraq and who must be read out of polite society. Might these attitudes be called thuggish also?

I speak for no war opponent but myself, and what she says about anti-war politicians may be true in some cases. I see little sign that most congressional anti-war Democrats oppose the Iraq occupation for any reason but political expediency. But it is disingenuous for Noonan to act as though all opponents of Bush's policy are politicians. In my view, the situation cannot be redeemed. The administration policy has created a context in which if Bush wins, the American people lose because success will embolden him and his successors and engender more anti-Americanism, perhaps domestic terrorism. The architects of the Iraq policy will conclude that America *can* govern the world's trouble spots after all, and enough of the public may believe it.

That will set the stage for future invasions and bombings, with the death roll of innocents to include Iranians, Syrians, and who knows who else.

But what about the Iraqis? Wouldn't most of them be better off if Bush succeeds? This misses the point that many innocent Iraqis will be killed on the way to this "victory." Better for the United States to get out now, avoid getting more blood on its hands, and let the people there figure out things for themselves.

Anti-war critics were right

Noonan tries to assume the position of neutral observer. Both the pro-war and anti-war side, she writes, are self-interestedly locked into their positions. Because of career interests, they have stopped thinking because their stake in their current stance is too great.

What is needed is simple maturity, a vow to look to — to care about — America's interests in the long term, a commitment to look at the facts as they are and try to come to conclusions. This may require in some cases a certain throwing off of preconceptions, previous statements, and former stands. It would certainly require the mature ability to come to agreement with those you otherwise hate, and the guts to summon the help of, and admit you need the help of, the other side.

Without this, we remain divided, and our division does nothing to help Iraq, or ourselves.

What is this woman going on about? Events have vindicated the principled opponents of war, invasion, regime change, and occupation. What preconceptions, previous statements, and former stands must they throw off now? What agreement must they come to with the unrepentant advocates of global American hegemony? What help do we need from them?

Noonan invokes "America's interests," but this is the root of the problem. America is an abstraction that, when disaggregated, is seen to comprise diverse interests. The biggest divergence is between the interests of most of the people and the interests of the state. We will make no progress in foreign affairs until we talk about *that* explicitly.

She calls on President Bush to be kinder to his opponents: "Would it help if the president were graceful, humble, and asked for help? Why, yes. Would it help if he credited those who opposed him with not only good motives but actual wisdom? Yes."

But don't misunderstand her. She sides with Bush and his unspeakably bad policy of war:

The president's warnings are realistic. He's right. At the end of the day we can't just up and leave Iraq. That would only make it worse. And it is not in the interests of America or the world that it be allowed to get worse.

She's on sounder ground when she imagines what the war opponents are thinking: "They believe it was his job *not* to put America in a position in which its security is imperiled; they resent his invitation to share responsibility for outcomes of decisions they opposed. And they resent it especially because he grants them nothing — no previous wisdom, no good intent — beyond a few stray words here and there."

Phony unity and patriotic forbearance are no substitutes for realism. It's time to get out.

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