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Just What We Need: New Reasons to Go to War **by Sheldon Richman**

A few days before Gen. David Petraeus confirmed for Congress how overworked the military is in Iraq, President Bush was in Croatia talking about the significance of inviting that country and Albania to join NATO.

“Henceforth, should any danger threaten your people, America and the NATO alliance will stand with you, and no one will be able to take your freedom away,” he said.

Any danger. Under the supposed obligations of NATO, the American people will be committed to go to war if necessary to protect Croatia and Albania from ... anyone. Macedonia could be next, if Greece can be bribed to go along.

Is there not something surreal about Americans’ being offered up for such service? But we live in surreal times, what with the U.S. military bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan with no end in sight and the president still rattling his saber against Iran. Perhaps only Terry Gilliam (*Brazil*) could do this story justice in a motion picture.

NATO is a product of the concept “collective security,” the ideal Woodrow Wilson envisioned for the League of Nations after World War I. That didn’t quite work out as he intended — the U.S. Senate unilateralists blocked U.S. membership when President Wilson refused to accept any changes in the charter — so it had to await another world war. As the theory was presented to the public, collective security was the method by which the civilized nations would keep peace in the world. Attacks on other nations by bad guys would be deterred by the knowledge that the good guys stood ready to come to the rescue. Think of it as the posse approach to world peace, except that the posse would be a formal and continuing organization.

In reality, collective security meant that any local conflict would have the potential to expand to global dimensions as other nations piled on. Moreover, since the leader of the collective-security forces — the United States — and other member nations would not be seen as disinterested parties in the resolution of conflicts and disposition of resources, the very concept contained the seeds of conflict.

NATO was a particular application of the collective-security concept. Supposedly its purpose during the Cold War was to protect Western Europe from the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact “partners.” Skeptics saw it as part of a U.S. encirclement of the USSR. At any rate, the Cold War ended quite a while ago, and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact disbanded. But NATO lives — bigger than ever. It’s even fighting in Afghanistan, which at last check was neither a member of the alliance nor anywhere near the North Atlantic.

President Bush and the other advocates of the growing alliance don’t seem to understand that if you bring NATO up to Russia’s doorstep, which seems to be the plan, the Russians may not believe it’s the Welcome Wagon.

Does anyone wonder where the government obtains the authority to promise to go to war over Croatia and Albania? It is simply taken for granted that the government may do this. That’s what governments do. In the United States, it’s what presidents do. Especially this president, who has asserted extraordinary autocratic powers in the last seven years.

The legal eagles in this administration don’t believe the president has to consult anyone before sending troops anywhere. In their view, that prerogative is part of the inherent powers of the presidency. The recently released 2003 “torture memo” by Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo states, “The decision to deploy military force in the defense of U.S. interests is expressly placed under presidential authority by the Vesting Clause ... and by the commander-in-chief clause.”

As conservative legal analyst Bruce Fein notes,

In other words, the president may launch pre-emptive war against any state or nonstate actor by his simple assertion that U.S. interests require it. Venezuela or Iran could be invaded on the president’s say-so alone to secure adequate oil and gas supplies.... In sum, the president has proclaimed the White House an uncrowned kingship.

It’s there in the Constitution — if you read it just right. Which is to say if you ignore Article I’s listing of the powers of Congress. Reading that section will fool you into believing that Congress has lots to say about war-making and the military; for example, it holds the exclusive power to declare war. How “quaint,” as this administration once referred to the Geneva Conventions. The power has not been asserted since 1941. (Not that the cowardly Congress is complaining.)

Imperial consequences

This is where the imperial mindset gets you. Congress is no longer necessary. The Bush administration might try to sell its views on the unitary executive as a government-streamlining

program. Why have three branches of government if one will do? Think of all the money the taxpayers could save! It's a deficit-slashing measure.

But seriously, where is the outrage? Bush already has U.S. troops bogged down in two open-ended occupations, at a cost of more than \$10 billion a month. *Ten billion dollars every 30 days!* We mere taxpayers can't get our minds around that idea. Preoccupied with our petty concerns, such as raising our children and saving for retirement, we actually think we have better things to do with *our* money. That's why we need wise leaders; they see the big picture.

More than 4,000 American troops have been killed in Iraq. The lives of thousands more have been ruined. Tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed and maimed. The surge in Iraq has been so successful that in March American bombers had to be called in to put down the Shi'ites in Basra — Shi'ites who were resisting the Shi'ite-led government with close ties to Iran, the supposed bogeyman of the Middle East. In Baghdad, residents were fleeing with as many personal belongings as they could carry because of the violence. The Green Zone, where the Iraqi government and American officials are hunkered down, has been under fierce Shi'ite attack.

Meanwhile, American officials — and Republican standard-bearer John McCain — talk up the threat of Sunni al-Qaeda in Iraq — that is, until they decide that Iran makes a better monster. We can forgive McCain; despite constant reminders, he thinks al-Qaeda is Shi'ite and taking its orders from Iran.

While Bush, McCain, and the rest of the war chorus tout all these signs that the surge is working, it has become clear that by the end of the year, there will be more U.S. troops in Iraq than were there before the surge began. That, by administration standards, is success. Stay the course, they say.

Meanwhile the military chiefs bemoan the state of the armed forces. Gen. Richard Cody, the Army's vice chief of staff, says the "lengthy and repeated deployments, with insufficient recovery time at home stations, have placed incredible stress on our soldiers and on their families, testing the resolve of the all-volunteer force like never before. I've never seen our lack of strength of strategic depth be where it is today."

That may be the only bright side of the story. There are apparently no fresh troops to send into a new conflict. Croatia and Albania may have to fend for themselves after all.

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