

It was supposed to be a “cakewalk”: The General and the Trap

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Global Research, April 08, 2008

[atimes.com](#) 8 April 2008

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

It was supposed to be a “cakewalk”. General David Petraeus would come to the US Congress on Tuesday, armed with his favorite charts showing that the “surge” had dramatically reduced violence in Iraq. He would earn universal acclaim for his plan to “pause” troop reductions from July until after the presidential election in November – the same plan that Republican John McCain counts on to help him win that election.

When it comes to Iraq, though, the George W Bush administration’s cakewalks never seem to turn out as planned. The renewed violence of these past weeks in Iraq, and the prospect of more to come, gives war critics ample ammunition for a counterattack. The Democrats, including Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, may find it irresistible to assault the general, and the president, with every argument they can muster in the hearings this week. However, a recent report suggests they may resist that impulse and treat the impact of the “surge” as an irrelevant issue.

Let’s hope that report is right, because a debate focused on military success or failure is a trap, with Petraeus’ testimony as the bait. After all, no debate in Congress will really be about the level of violence in Iraq. “Has the surge worked?” is just a symbolic way of asking: “Would you rather believe that America is a winner or a loser?” And in any battle over patriotic symbolism, the Republicans always seem to have the bigger guns.

So the Democrats would be smart to refuse the bait and insist that this is not an old-fashioned World War II-style conflict, where force can produce a clearcut winner. Then they could refocus the debate on two crucial truths: we have no right to be in Iraq; the sooner we get out, the sooner we can begin to heal the terrible damage the war has done to us here at home.

Decoding the battle over Iraq It should have been obvious all along that the Republicans do not mean it literally when they claim that reducing violence in Iraq is their highest priority. It’s not likely that too many of them care a whole lot about the killing and maiming of Iraqis. So when they speak so urgently about lower levels of violence, it’s a coded way of saying something else; in fact, a lot of things.

For starters, “reduced violence” is a way to conjure up an image of American “success” in a war in which no real success (forget about “victory”) is possible. The level of violence is the only concrete yardstick the administration has come up with to gauge the success of the “surge” – no small matter when a successful surge has become the prime symbol of achievement for US troops and so for the president’s (and John McCain’s) war policies. Because the Bush administration still hopes to sell its failing war to the public by turning it

into a gripping story of winners and losers, “violence” has been its currency, its coin of the realm.

Since that story took hold, supporters of Bush’s Iraq policy have insisted that violence there really has been subsiding, hence that his “surge” strategy has worked. When Democrats and other war critics rejected that claim, they sparked a battle over who has the right, and the proper criteria, to evaluate the surge and its post-surge effects. So violence-lowering success in Iraq also became a symbolic measure of the president’s political success here at home.

In fact, the home front is key – as it has been for years. Bush came into office as the hero of the right, not because he had sworn to defeat terrorism (that didn’t start until September 11, 2001), but because he had sworn to defeat 1960s-style liberalism and “secular humanism”. For conservatives the war in Iraq, the “war on terrorism”, and the political and cultural wars at home have all been symbols of the same long-term struggle against trends they see undermining the fabric of American society.

By choosing McCain to lead their troops in presidential battle, Republicans have voted with their feet. In effect, they have decided to make all their cherished battles hinge on the battle over Iraq policy and the “surge”.

When McCain talks about Iraq, his words always point up the symbolic nature of the battle there. He offers no reasonable idea of who we are fighting or why. In fact, on the occasions when he brings the matter up, he seems remarkably confused about the actual cast of characters in that country. As a result, he can offer no sensible outline of what “victory” in Iraq might mean.

Since McCain’s talk about the war is really a code, it makes perfect sense to feature that Bush-era bogeyman, al-Qaeda, as our main enemy in Iraq. Al-Qaeda, after all, is “the terrorists” and we are always fighting “the terrorists”. It makes no less sense, in his symbolic universe, to insist that al-Qaeda terrorists are being trained in Iran, a country whose leadership is deeply hostile to that organization. All enemies are interchangeable, because all are merely symbols of a vaguely defined sense of uncontrolled evil, which is said to threaten America’s security and moral virtue at home and abroad.

Bush was supposed to defeat that evil. He has obviously failed. Now, conservatives pin their hopes on a new champion whose mantra is: “no surrender”.

American ‘stability’ In addition to “reduced violence”, the “surge” and “no surrender”, the Republicans wield another symbol of America as a righteous winner: the goal of achieving “stability” in Iraq. It may be the most seductive image of all, because it exerts a strong appeal across the political spectrum.

Five years ago, when American forces quickly dismantled Iraqi society, liberal as well as conservative pundits announced that it was up to our forces to restore “stability” – as if the Iraqis themselves had wrought the chaos from which we were to rescue them. Though the American military did most of the destabilizing in Iraq, this historical fact was set aside in favor of the hoary myth that America is invariably a force for good, uniquely dedicated and qualified to bring order out of chaos around the world.

War – righteous, courageous and ultimately victorious – has always been a central theme in

the American myth of stability. Pollsters still take that myth for granted, and reinforce it, when they ask pointed questions like: “How would you say things are going for the US in its efforts to bring stability and order to Iraq?” or “Should the US maintain its current troop level in Iraq to help secure peace and stability, or reduce its number of troops?”

Vietnam dealt this mythology a near-fatal blow. Nearly four decades later, at a time when conservatives, moderates, and even many liberals worry about all sorts of forces that seem to threaten the nation’s cohesion and moral fiber, reviving a cherished national myth holds broad appeal across the political spectrum. Millions debate the question of military success because they want to know whether they should, or can, still believe that America is the champion of order and stability in a dangerously unstable world. Asking “Did the surge work?” is a symbolic way of asking not only “Can America be a winner?” but “Can the stories of the America we once knew and loved still work?”

When the charismatic general, known to colleagues as “King David” Petraeus, comes before the cameras with his charts and statistics to “prove” that violence levels are lower, and so that the “surge” has worked, he will once again dangle the sweet smell of success before Congress. As soon as the pundits and the public get a whiff of that bait, it’s not just conservatives who will be sorely tempted to swallow it, regardless of what they know is happening in Iraq. If Petraeus can offer anything that might look like plausible evidence of “progress toward stability”, or even the possibility of progress, the whole web of patriotic myth and symbolism will automatically kick in and the usual spell will be woven.

If Democrats and war critics go on the counterattack against the “surge” success story, they will keep that mythic drama on center stage in the theater of political battle. No matter how logically persuasive their arguments may be, they will ensnare themselves in the general’s – and so the president’s – trap, because they will make America and its cherished myths look like losers. And that may very well end up making the Democrats losers.

Just check the latest polls on the presidential race. McCain is basing his campaign on unstinting support for Bush’s war and his economic policies, both of which are resounding failures, especially among moderate and independent voters. Yet he is running roughly even with both Clinton and Obama, and some polls even show him ahead.

How could this be? The polls show that most voters do indeed oppose the war and think that the decision to invade Iraq was a mistake. Yet they also reveal that more Americans trust McCain than either Clinton or Obama to make the right choices on Iraq (and on national security in general). McCain scores particularly well on these issues among independents.

As the mainstream media touted “reduced violence” in Iraq in the second half of 2007 and early 2008, the level of support for McCain’s “no surrender” policy rose steadily. McCain’s campaign survives, and thrives, only by ignoring reality and relying on its mastery of a language of American identity centered on the symbolism of an American “good war”. Any debate about military success in Iraq, however contentious, keeps his strong suit in the spotlight.

Escaping the general and the trap Yes, the Democrats might win by making military success or failure in Iraq the central issue of the coming election – if Iraqi violence continues to rise. But that violence would have to go on rising until election day (or the McCain-boosting “success” image would once again kick in). It’s a big gamble that depends on factors utterly beyond their control and it threatens to leave them trapped in a narrow corner.

Of course, Petraeus has trapped himself in a corner too - and Bush and McCain are there with him. They must also wait for events largely beyond their control to unfold, helplessly bobbing like corks on the tides of Iraqi violence.

The Democrats, however, can turn General Entrap-Ur into General Entrapped by refusing to treat the issue of military success or failure as the central question of the moment. The fact is: the competing sides in Iraq have always been ill-defined and constantly shifting. Once the Sunni insurgency started there in 2003, no one has ever been able to say what an American victory might really mean. It's no small truth that "success" in an Iraq where even Petraeus can't imagine "victory", might well prove more damaging than any failure.

Wise Democrats would heed the words of media critic Norman Solomon: "Arguments over whether US forces can prevail in Iraq bypass a truth that no amount of media spin can change: The US war effort in Iraq has always been illegitimate and fundamentally wrong." The longer we stay in Iraq, the longer we perpetuate the wrongs we have done, regardless of whether we achieve military success by anyone's measure.

We are uninvited intruders in Iraq. We invaded the country on false pretenses. It's long past time for us to admit that truth and leave. The longer we stay, the longer we tell the world that invasion and occupation are okay with us, and the longer we leave America's moral reputation around the world in tatters. When our troops leave, we will set an example for countries that have occupied, or might be tempted to occupy, other lands. And we can begin to heal from our moral bankruptcy, not to mention our impending financial one.

If Democrats take that approach, they will shift the terms of the debate. Then they can speak truths about the war that the American people might be prepared to understand. They can pose hard questions - and not ones of military strategy either - that the administration simply cannot answer. That would push war supporters deeper into their self-made trap whose tripwire is the irrelevance of their quest for military success.

But neither Democratic candidate for president is likely to take such an approach. Both argue that the US should remove some substantial number of troops from Iraq (though not all), and cut back military expenditures in Iraq, so that we can spend more and fight more on other fronts. Their arguments are all about the most "effective" ways to protect what are always termed "American interests" around the world. Some dare call it empire, though in any presidential campaign that word will be politely avoided.

Criticism of the US military is politely avoided, too. The candidates compete with each other to see who can offer the most fulsome praise of "our troops", while heaping all the blame on the feeble Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

As long as the Democrats are committed to sustaining a neo-liberal imperial project, they have to try as hard as the Republicans to revive the myth of American troops as a force for global stability. The bipartisan guardians of empire need that myth to mask their economic and political goals - if only to keep the public paying the exorbitant bills.

The Democrats have already demonstrated that they value a myth of American stability even above winning the presidency. Think Florida in the weeks following election day 2000. In the months preceding election day 2008, they may very well make the same choice again, and that would be tragic.

With the polls showing that many Americans may consider voting for the war-makers even while opposing the war itself, this year's election offers a rare opportunity to confront the difference between symbol and reality. It's time to insist that war should be seen not through the lens of myth and symbol, but as the brutal, self-defeating reality it is.

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