

[WAR]

INDEFENSIBLE SECRETARY

Fiasco, the title of Thomas Ricks's book about the Iraq War, is the perfect summation of Donald Rumsfeld's tenure as secretary of defense. The mismanagement of the war and Rumsfeld's resistance to changing course have now become Beltway conventional wisdom. Everyone from Hillary Clinton to *The Weekly Standard* to rows of retired generals was able to unite around the idea that Rumsfeld should be replaced.

But his culpability goes far beyond invading without enough troops or an adequate plan to secure order in Baghdad. Iraqis would have no more appreciated being invaded by half a million troops than by the smaller army we sent. The greater mistake—too tame a word—lay in the ways Rumsfeld's Pentagon pushed the president and the country into believing that invading Iraq was a plausible response to 9/11. It was Rumsfeld who staffed the Pentagon with officials who had been pinning for an invasion of Iraq for years before 9/11. His staff poured into the Washington mix a steady stream of essentially false intelligence—cherry-picked factoids that made it seem that Saddam was in cahoots with al-Qaeda and possessed weapons of mass destruction. The transformation of the Pentagon into a vessel for achieving esoteric neoconservative goals was entirely Rumsfeld's doing, and if the new Congress holds hearings about the run-up to the Iraq War, his Office of Special Plans should be the probe's ground zero.

Voters have finally forced George W. Bush to recognize what he long resisted—that Rumsfeld must go. His successor, Robert Gates, is a consummate public servant, willing to leave a job he loved at Texas A&M to take on a hellish task: disengaging from a disastrous war in a way that does the least possible damage to America's national interests.



By temperament and experience, the former CIA chief seems well suited for what will surely be a thankless role. We admire his sense of duty and wish him the best.

[IMMIGRATION]

DEMS FOR BUSH?

Last issue *TAC* assessed the risks of voting Democratic in the midterms. We concluded that it was vital to America's domestic health and global reputation to repudiate the Bush agenda. Moreover, placing even one house of Congress in contrarian hands would check this executive's wilder ambitions: a little gridlock is a good thing.

We were mindful that immigration reform could be imperiled by losing the Republican majority in the House. Tom Tancredo and his brave caucus succeeded in stalling the Senate amnesty bill despite significant White House pressure. But there seemed scant chance that given polls showing overwhelming support for border control and opposition to blanket amnesty, Democrats—many of whom sampled immigration-reform rhetoric on the stump—would use their new majority to deliver gifts from the Bush wish list.

Not that he isn't asking. Before the final results were tallied, Tony Snow was

already talking about the “interesting opportunities” the power shift presented for “comprehensive immigration reform.” The next day, the president called immigration “an issue where I believe we can find some common ground with the Democrats.”

We hope not. As a matter of pure politics, Democrats would be foolish to enact the agenda items Bush's own party denied him. Worse, they would be handing him a two-for-one victory: his pet legislation along with affirmation that he's indeed “a uniter, not a divider” (his appellation of choice before anointing himself *The Decider*.) Worst of all, they would be bucking the popular will to do so. None of that is a good way to stretch their majority beyond the next two years.

[CULTURE]

ONE WAR AT A TIME

The Nov. 7 elections returned a mixed verdict for social conservatives. They can take heart that voters resoundingly rejected gay marriage: bans in seven states passed, with only Arizona—where the constitutional amendment was so broadly worded that it might have interfered with rights of contract beyond marriage—falling short. But otherwise there was little good news: a Mis-

souri initiative to fund embryonic stem-cell research succeeded, while South Dakota's comprehensive ban on abortion went down to defeat.

Ground lost in the abortion wars is dismaying, but pro-lifers should not be surprised—nor demoralized. The South Dakota result reaffirms what is already well known: the public balks at abortion bans that make no exceptions. Embryonic stem-cell research, meanwhile, has been framed as life-saving medicine for Michael J. Fox rather than as deadly experimentation on human embryos—experimentation that so far has not produced anything like the results its partisans have touted.

In both these battles, conservatives won't be able to advance until they can better educate the public. But that's been difficult over the past five years, as the Right has instead devoted itself to defending an indefensible war in Iraq and throwing up smokescreens for presidential power-grabs. It's high time conservatives made a choice: they can be the War Party or they can be the Party of Life.

[AMERICA]

NATIONAL QUESTION

The deteriorating war in Iraq and Republican congressmen lusting after dollars and pages were uppermost on voters' minds. But two ballot initiatives pointed to another, less pronounced but no less important, theme of the night: voters have had enough of multiculturalism and ethnic stratification. In Michigan, a ban on affirmative action in public education, employment, and contracting won with 58 percent of the vote. In Arizona, an overwhelming 74 percent—including 50 percent of Hispanics—supported a measure to make English the state's official language. These were blow-out victories for conservatives in states that otherwise gave Democrats a very good night. But are Bush, Rove, and RNC chief Ken Mehlman paying atten-

tion? Don't bet on it. If Republicans want to retake Congress in 2008, these issues may provide a way to win. But first the GOP will have to find new leaders—and some backbone.

[JUSTICE]

SADDAM'S EXIT STRATEGY

Unable to produce genuine good news from Iraq before the Tuesday vote, the Bush administration had to settle for the Saddam verdict: *Quelle surprise!* he is guilty of terrible crimes and faces the death penalty. At this point, everyone must solemnly intone that Saddam was an evil figure, and thank someone—George W. Bush and the GOP, perhaps?—that justice will be done.

In some future era, it will be permissible to raise national-interest questions about the whole Saddam obsession. James Pinkerton jumped the gun in these pages over two years ago, using humor to make points that probably couldn't be raised seriously without igniting a chicken-hawk word-processor wargasm. But under the rubric of a Swiftian "Modest Proposal," Pinkerton pointed out that restoring Saddam to power could solve the bevy of problems that the Bush doctrine had created in Iraq: "His bluster aside, Saddam was no threat to the U.S., as now we know. His rattletrap fascist-socialist dictatorship kept Iraq poor and pathetic, completely incapable of maintaining any sort of WMD stockpile."

The post-Saddam Iraq now being born will likely be ethnically divided and largely lawless, with enclaves under the control of radical Shi'ite fundamentalists and Sunni terrorists—men who, unlike Saddam, will never aspire to pal around with Donald Rumsfeld. Saddam was bad man, who killed and tortured many. But Iraq without him is hardly improved, and America, having deluded itself into being obsessed with him, is less safe than it was in March 2003. ■

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Go Webb Go

Is it too soon for a “Webb for President” bandwagon? Of course it is. But Webb’s landslide win in a Southern state—well, make that a pre-recount third of a percent-

age-point win carved from big margins in the Washington suburbs—has transformed him instantly into a commodity of interest for the Democrats, as was former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner before him. A national audience will now become aware of the Webb paradox: the qualities that make him most compelling are the very ones that make him not a particularly smooth or natural politician. Despite Webb’s impressive military background, it’s not as if he commanded armies in a winning war. No one will offer Jim Webb an Eisenhower ride to a higher nomination.

My own Webb bandwagon moment occurred in late September at a fundraiser in Northern Virginia. The candidate arrived, slightly late, while a suburbanite audience awaited the chance to shake his hand, size him up. He worked the room for a few minutes, our host introduced him to me, and he stopped for several minutes to converse about a Paul Schroeder essay that had appeared in *TAC*. This was thrilling, of course, and it’s impossible to imagine any other major-party candidate (even among the coterie of *TAC* readers in the House GOP) who would have behaved the same way.

As an aide shuffled impatiently, Webb shifted into a more normal politician mode, greeting the people gathered. Then he stepped up to address the room. It was an odd speech, devoid of enthusiasm-generating applause lines, indeed devoid of any applause lines at all. It was almost professorial—an

attempt to analyze the categories of Left and Right in the country, explain why they were outmoded and how his campaign was working towards transcending them and fueling a new synthesis. You had to pay attention or you would miss major points.

I found myself recalling a phrase I had first heard in history class about the French socialist Leon Blum—“an intellectual in politics.” Webb was attempting to give voice to common-man themes of the sort that might be inspired by the Scots-Irish of his critically acclaimed ethnography, *Born Fighting*, and to appeal more generally to the American middle and working classes. But if it was a latently populist message, it was delivered in distinctly non-populist style.

Webb’s intellectualism ensures that he will do something that professional politicians hardly ever do: think through a position and take a public stand on it without consulting the polls. The essay he wrote for the *Washington Post* on Iraq, seven months before the war began, was startling in its prescience. Webb questioned whether an overthrow of Saddam would “actually increase our ability to win the war against international terrorism” and pointed out that the measure of military success can be preventing wars and well as fighting them. He charged, “those who are pushing for a unilateral war in Iraq know full well that there is no exit strategy if we invade.” He concluded, “the Iraqis are a multiethnic people filled with competing

factions who in many cases would view a U.S. occupation as infidels invading the cradle of Islam. ... In Japan, American occupation forces quickly became 50,000 friends. In Iraq, they would quickly become 50,000 terrorist targets.” If any major senators were thinking like this long before the invasion, not many Americans heard of it.

Peter Boyer’s *New Yorker* profile of the Webb-Allen contest noted that Webb spent much campaign time lamenting the widening gap between the very rich and the rest of the country, noting that he regularly pushes for stronger border security and strict enforcement of laws that will stop corporate exploitation of cheap illegal-alien labor. Webb adds that “free trade is not fair trade” and is open in his disdain for the neocons: “These guys are so far to the left you think they’re on the right. It’s right out of the Communist International—exporting ideology at the point of a gun.” Concluded Boyer: “He almost seems a Pat Buchanan conservative.”

This is not really true, in that most Buchananites, and especially including my McLean, Virginia-based colleague (who has kept his own counsel about his vote last Tuesday) are serious cultural conservatives, for whom Webb’s pro-choice position and other more typical Democratic social-issue stands are likely or potential deal-breakers.

But it may be true that no successful politician is doing more to shatter the post-1960s categories of Left and Right than Webb is trying to do. If the present results hold, the Old Dominion has given us a vastly more complex senator than the oleaginous George Allen and perhaps its most interesting emissary to the upper chamber since the 19th century. ■