

Declare Victory and Stay

Bush has yet to join the reality-based community.

By **Scott McConnell**

MANY WHO WATCHED President Bush's Iraq speech at the Naval Academy had one main question in mind. It didn't concern what the president would say—the “stay the course” message had been leaked beforehand: we would remain in Iraq until “victory” was achieved. The real curiosity was about the president's mental state, about how close to reality he and his advisors were. Months before Bush invaded Iraq, a White House senior advisor told reporter Ron Suskind that he (Suskind) was part of “what we call the reality-based community” but “that's not the way the world really works anymore.” “We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities. ... We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

What the Bush administration did—creating a new reality—was to invade Iraq with scarcely a tissue of international support after feeding the American people and the world community a farrago of false or hyped-up reports disguised as intelligence.

Of course, Bush and his team read the polls sufficiently to know that some appearance of mastering the situation is needed. But is the White House able to gauge and respond rationally to the new circumstances? Is it inclined to rejoin the “reality-based community”?

Several weeks ago, *Insight* published a report claiming that Bush was increasingly isolated, estranged from Karl Rove, angry at his father as a result of Brent Scowcroft's interview in *The New Yorker* and no longer speaking to him except on

family occasions. His circle of consultation had shrunk down to Condi Rice, his mom, Karen Hughes, and wife Laura. Perhaps the report was exaggerated or even mistaken. But then several weeks later, Seymour Hersh—renowned for the quality of his Washington sources—reported that Bush had become more detached, leaving more issues to Rove and Cheney. “They keep him in the gray world of religious idealism, where he wants to be anyway,” said Hersh's informant. His appearances are increasingly limited to audiences that are guaranteed to be non-critical. Lyndon Johnson was similarly constrained when the public turned against the Vietnam War, but the difference, said Hersh's informant, was that “Johnson knew he was a prisoner in the White House, but Bush has no idea.”

Bush at the Naval Academy was clearly not Richard Nixon, facing the cameras in primetime while seated in the Oval Office, soberly laying out his plan to extricate the United States “with honor” from a war he didn't initiate. Nixon was never able to persuade the already alienated to back his Vietnamization program, but the speeches were substantive, serious. Until Watergate crippled him, he was able to keep a political majority behind his policy—whatever the costs in U.S. casualties.

Bush, by contrast, chose a podium that evoked the imperial, a massive backdrop of blue and bright gold (his tie matched), the Naval Academy seal blown up to serve as an icon for the message of the day: “Plan for Victory.” As in a new product launch, repetition was key: the word “victory” was used 15 times, the golden “Plan for Victory” logo

lined up in rows, sure to dominate every camera angle. A Duke University political scientist hired by the White House stressed that professing that “victory” was our goal was crucial to maintaining public support for war. “Freedom” was apparently demoted, Bush deploying the word a mere eight times during his peroration.

As for content, might it have been a nod to reality to acknowledge that the enemy is comprised of Saddamists, terrorists, and the White House neologism, “rejectionists”? The latter coinage refers to ethnic Sunnis moved to revolt because they don't like foreigners invading their country. Bush had never before admitted that any faction of the Iraqi resistance could be motivated by normal human emotions, but apparently the fact that U.S. Army commanders are reaching out to the Sunni population, even those known to be supporting the resistance, has penetrated the Bush bubble.

In the end, the only goal admitted was a free Iraq, an outpost of democracy that will be the first domino in the Arab world. It is, like all the Wilsonian slogans that have come from the White House, a pretty idea, something that would very nice if it had the slightest chance of coming true in the real world. It doesn't.

What is coming true is an intensifying dirty war between armed tribal militias, interrupted occasionally by elections. The main motivation for much of the insurgency is the American occupation—which has become a global recruiting tool for al-Qaeda, probably the only thing in the world that could tempt Ba'athist military officers to make common cause with jihadist terrorists.

What is also coming true is the degradation of the U.S. military, through slowing recruitment and the retirement of experienced officers. Congressman John Murtha, a decorated veteran, probably the figure more trusted by the military than anyone else in Congress, has been told for months that the Army is being broken in Iraq and that the longer the war goes on, the more serious and difficult repairing the damage will be.

There is no good way out—and certainly no path to victory. Iraqi ethnic militias will do battle whether we leave in six months or 10 years. The U.S. Army may well have to fight its way out, as the Israeli military historian Martin Van Creveld recently suggested, America's high-tech equipment being too valuable to be left to the Iraqis as aircraft and armor were left to the South Vietnamese 32 years ago. An American presence in the region will be necessary, perhaps, as the University of Pennsylvania's Ian Lustick has written, through the mechanism of the UN in conjunction with other great powers. Bush has so estranged America from the real world of diplomacy that many—even on Capitol Hill—have forgotten that no country has an interest in allowing Iraq to become a base for jihadism.

Bush's speech affirmed that his administration has not begun to contemplate such alternatives. The president offered no timetable for withdrawal, conveyed no hint of thinking of Iraq in any terms but as a "beacon of freedom." This rhetoric, rousing to a dwindling core of supporters, is detached from military and economic reality. It confirms that the Bush presidency is incapable of taking steps to limit the damage that it has caused. Only a president who can acknowledge that the invasion was a terrible mistake can formulate a new policy. Three years from now, the hole America has dug itself into will be that much deeper—and that much more difficult to escape. ■

The liberation of Iraq to end oppression of the Iraqi people has not been altogether successful.

Iraqi Deputy Human Rights Minister Aida Ussayran has courageously confirmed that Iraqi officials have been torturing and abusing prisoners in jails across the country. According to Ussayran, the Human Rights Ministry found that women were frequently being arrested without cause and then raped by male guards. One woman said she had been raped seven times on the top floor of the Interior Ministry, which is the location of the ministry's intelligence offices. Ussayran's comments came two weeks after 169 men who had been tortured were discovered by U.S. forces in a south-central Baghdad building also run by the Interior Ministry. The men, mostly Sunni Arabs, reportedly had been beaten with leather belts and steel rods, crammed into tiny rooms, and forced to sit in their own excrement. A senior U.S. military source reports that the abuse wasn't an isolated incident and is likely common in Iraqi-run prisons. On Dec. 4, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Peter Pace publicly disputed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's judgment that the U.S. could do nothing about abuses by the Iraqi government except file a written complaint. Pace disagreed, saying it was the obligation of U.S. military personnel to intervene and stop any torture that they witness. Rumsfeld was not pleased with Pace's comments.



The Bosnian police have determined that local Islamic militants were about to carry out a suicide bombing,

sparkling fears that the tactic will be used more extensively in Western Europe. Suicide vests and an arsenal of other weapons were seized during a raid on an apartment in the Ilidza suburb near the airport in Sarajevo, as well as homemade videos featuring several potential suicide bombers asking God for forgiveness for their impending "sacrifice." Two teenage would-be bombers, one a Bosnian Muslim living in Sweden and the other a Turk living in Denmark, were arrested. The police believe that Western European Muslims, who carry European Union passports enabling them to travel freely, are now being actively recruited and trained for suicide attacks.



Vice President Dick Cheney is orchestrating opposition to turning over to the Senate Intelligence Committee's investigators the CIA-produced Sept. 21, 2001 Presidential Daily Brief.

Cheney is citing security concerns in his attempt to stop the further dissemination of any and all intelligence reports that could embarrass the White House. The brief, which included the most up to date and reliable intelligence, explicitly denied any credible linkage between Saddam Hussein and either 9/11 or al-Qaeda. Even after receiving the CIA report, Cheney and the Pentagon publicly continued to insist that Saddam and al-Qaeda were connected and that Iraq might have played a role in 9/11. While the always compliant Senate Intelligence Chairman Pat Roberts is working to limit the political damage from his committee's investigation, much of the incriminating information will almost certainly be leaked by Democratic senators on the committee. Some Republican senators with presidential ambitions also could turn against the White House on this issue.

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