

[EXECUTIVE]

BUSH IN DREAMLAND

In his recent televised address, President Bush spoke about a place he called “free Iraq,” which Americans are dying (and killing) to defend. This “free Iraq” will counter Iran, marginalize al-Qaeda, and set a stirring example of thriving democracy throughout the Middle East.

Regrettably, it is an entirely imaginary place. There is no more a “free Iraq” than there was four and half years ago at the time of the invasion. Iraq is the name of a place populated by people with sectarian and tribal loyalties who fear and hate one another—a place from which a huge portion of the middle class has fled to escape the chaos that America unleashed.

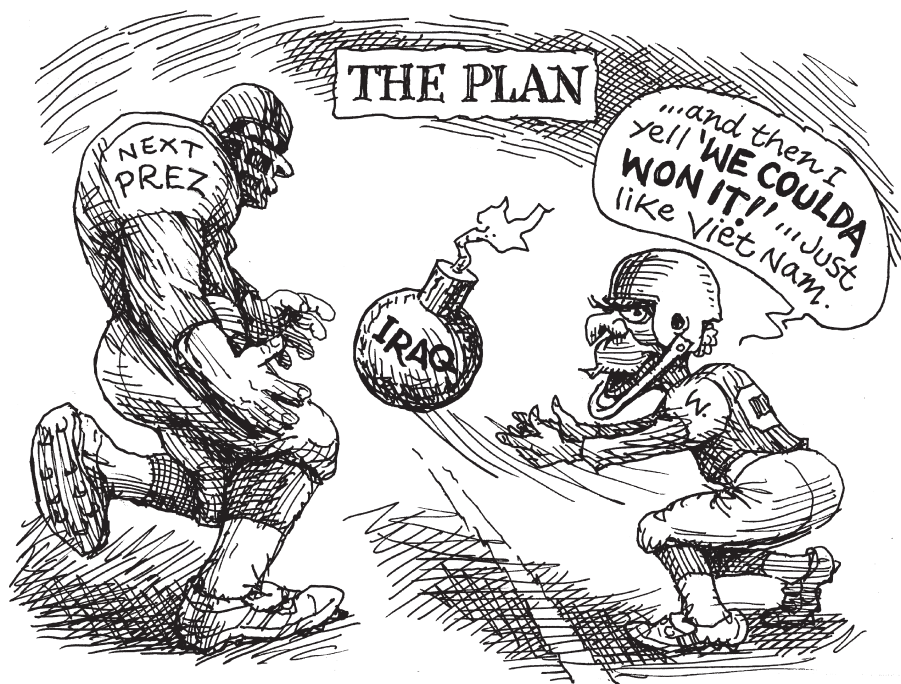
No matter your view of George W. Bush, it is unnerving to see an American president carrying on before the world like a crazy man, speaking emotionally about a place that everyone else knows does not exist but that he wants American troops to occupy for the rest of our lives.

Equally troubling was the president’s bid to resurrect the rhetoric of “good” and “evil” by reading from an e-mail sent by the family of a fallen soldier. There was something very 2002 about this effort to summon the sentiments of that happier time in his presidency. Other catchwords from the era like “cake-walk” and “greeted with flowers” are of course no longer available. But “good” and “evil” may still resonate, though a war in which millions of Iraqis have been killed, wounded, or forced from their homes as a consequence of our actions should make Americans wary of such binary moralism.

[WAR]

THE CONTRACT ON IRAQ

After a Sept. 16 shootout involving American security contractor Blackwater USA left up to 20 Iraqi civilians dead, the Interior Ministry pulled the firm’s



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operating license and threatened to prosecute those involved. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki says he will not tolerate “the killing of our citizens in cold blood.” The poor puppet seems to think that all those purple fingers actually gave Iraqis permission to run their own country.

Blackwater, which currently has over 1,500 personnel in Iraq, provides armed escorts for American VIPs. The episode in question occurred when a car bomb exploded near a six-vehicle State Department convoy returning to the Green Zone. Insurgents descended, and Blackwater helicopters allegedly fired into the neighborhood. According to the *New York Times*, the company’s security guards on the ground also shot up a nearby car that failed to stop, killing a couple and their infant. Accounts conflict: Blackwater claims that it only fired upon armed insurgents; Iraqi officials maintain that the contractors began shooting and throwing stun grenades to clear the scene.

An investigation is promised, but one thing is certain: after thousands dead and billions spent, we cannot even secure Baghdad.

So Blackwater stays busy—and will likely stay in Iraq. A 2004 American-issued order exempts the contractors from Iraqi law. They work for the U.S.

government, and it needs this private shadow army far more than it needs to maintain the charade of a sovereign Iraq.

[IRAN]

THE OTHER GENERAL’S REPORT

Breaking the most dangerous of Washington taboos, Gen. John Abizaid says the world could find “a way to live with a nuclear Iran.” Furthermore, war with Tehran would “be devastating for everybody, and we should avoid it to every extent that we can.” The man ought to know. The former head of U.S. Central Command, fluent in Arabic, has more experience in the region than all members of the Congress and Bush Cabinet combined.

Yet even after a disastrous campaign in Iraq, the general’s candid assessment finds no echo among elected officials. The political class still believes war is the preferred solution to any foreign-policy question, rather than a last resort.

The top-tier presidential candidates, Republican and Democrat alike, seem anxious to demonstrate that not only would they bomb Iran—they would bomb it faster than their opponents, with more disregard for innocent life and less concern for international opinion. This hyper-militarism is considered the bare minimum to qualify as a “serious candidate.”

Abizaid told the Center for Strategic and International Studies that there is a basis for hope that Iran will move away from its current anti-Western stance. If the 2008 candidates adopted even a measure of the general's realism, he might be proved right.

[ELECTION]

TOTALITARIAN TEMPTATION

Say what you will about the now notorious MoveOn ad making a sophomoric pun on General Petraeus's name. It has gotten results—of a sort. The most interesting, if inadvertent, may have been its smoking out of the leadership temperament of leading Republican candidates.

Take John McCain, once a frontrunner, still a darling of the neoconservative wing of the party. He responded by telling a New Hampshire audience that MoveOn “ought to be thrown out of the country.” Of course that was only his initial reaction, and campaign aides rushed to remind him that MoveOn members were citizens with constitutional rights, etc.

McCain may have gotten confused and believed he was running for president of Pakistan or some place where vexatious critics can simply be deported. But probably better that voters find that out now rather than later.

[POLITICS]

FOREIGN LEGION

Three months after immigration legislation met with a resounding defeat, Sen. Dick Durbin is reviving the amnesty-granting DREAM Act and hitching it to the latest defense appropriations bill. DREAM—Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors—offers citizenship to illegal immigrants serving in the military. Given the public reaction the last time around, it is surprising that any legislator would support a bill with a whiff of amnesty to it.

But imperial-minded lawmakers are now realizing that Iraq occupation duty

is a job not enough Americans will do. A sensible answer might be to recalibrate our foreign policy to accord with the nation's resources. But don't be surprised if Congress chooses a different route, bribing foreigners to fill America's military ranks in a remake of policies that, it has been sarcastically noted, “worked out so well for the Roman Empire.”

[MEDIA]

PHOTOSYNTHESIS

A picture is worth a thousand words, the saying goes, but millions might not suffice to delve into significance of the two photographs that fortuitously ran on the front page of the Sept. 19 *New York Times*. The top one was unusual enough: a queue of Palestinian school girls in Nablus, 11 or 12 years old, weeping and shielding their eyes in terror as Israeli troops battled with Palestinian militants outside. The most commonly presented image of Palestinians in America is with rock firmly in hand prior to throwing, but these carefully dressed girls look—but for the fear in their faces—as if they might attend parochial school in an American suburb.

On the bottom of the page was an even more arresting photo, one of dozens the Holocaust Museum in Washington recently received from an American World War II veteran who recovered them in a German attic. It depicts guards and staff of Auschwitz at leisure, young German women giggling with an accordionist during the death camp's final year. They illustrate, about as well as anything conceivably could, Hannah Arendt's argument about the banality of evil.

The subject matter of the two photos are deeply and inextricably linked, though it is far from clear the *Times* so intended it. If some future Toynbee wanted to delve into the main themes of our own era, he could find many worse places to begin. ■

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Sycophant Savior

General Petraeus wins a battle in Washington—if not in Baghdad.

By Andrew J. Bacevich

IN COMMON PARLANCE, the phrase “political general” is an epithet, the inverse of the warrior or frontline soldier. In any serious war, with big issues at stake, to assign command to a political general is to court disaster—so at least most Americans believe. But in fact, at the highest levels, successful command requires a sophisticated grasp of politics. At the summit, war and politics merge and become inextricably intertwined. A general in chief not fully attuned to the latter will not master the former.

George Washington, U.S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower were all “political generals” in the very best sense of the term. Their claims to immortality rest not on their battlefield exploits—Washington actually won few battles, and Grant achieved his victories through brute force rather than finesse, while Ike hardly qualifies as a field commander at all—but on the skill they demonstrated in translating military power into political advantage. Each of these three genuinely great soldiers possessed a sophisticated appreciation for war’s political dimension.

David Petraeus is a political general. Yet in presenting his recent assessment of the Iraq War and in describing the “way forward,” Petraeus demonstrated that he is a political general of the worst kind—one who indulges in the politics of accommodation that is Washington’s bread and butter but has thereby deferred a far more urgent political imperative, namely, bringing

our military policies into harmony with our political purposes.

From the very beginning of the Iraq War, such harmony has been absent. The war’s military and political aspects have been badly out of synch. (In this regard, the hackneyed comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam are tragically apt.) The failure to plan for an occupation, the wildly inflated expectations of Iraq’s rapid transformation into a liberal democracy, Donald Rumsfeld’s stubborn refusal to acknowledge the insurgency’s existence until long after it had begun, the deeply flawed kick-down-the-door campaign that ensued once Rumsfeld could no longer deny reality: all of these meant that from the outset, the exertions of U.S. troops, however great, tended to be at odds with our stated political intentions. Our actions were counterproductive.

The Petraeus-Crocker hearings found Petraeus in a position to resolve that problem. Over the previous eight months, a discredited president had effectively abdicated responsibility for managing the war. “I trust David Petraeus” became George W. Bush’s mantra, suggesting an astonishing level of presidential deference. Sometime in early 2007, the task of formulating basic strategy for Iraq had effectively migrated from Washington to Baghdad, passing from the office of the commander in chief to the headquarters of the senior field commander. The president made it clear that he intended to take his cues from his general. Military

judgment would inform, even determine, political decisions.

The general has now made his call, and President Bush has endorsed it: the surge having succeeded (so at least we are assured), it will now be curtailed. The war will continue, albeit on a marginally smaller scale. As events develop, it just might become smaller still. Only time will tell.

Petraeus has chosen a middle course, carefully crafted to cause the least amount of consternation among various Washington constituencies he is eager to accommodate. This is the politics of give and take, of horse trading, of putting lipstick on a pig. Ultimately, it is the politics of avoidance.

A political general in the mold of Washington or Grant would have taken a different course, using his moment in the spotlight not to minimize consternation but to stir it up to the maximum extent. He would have capitalized on his status as man of the hour to oblige civilian leaders, both in Congress and in the executive branch, to do what they have not done since the Iraq War began—namely, their jobs. He would have insisted upon the president and the Congress making decisions that wartime summons them—and not military commanders—to make. Instead, Petraeus issued everyone a pass.

* * *

In testifying before House and Senate committees about the current situation in Iraq, Petraeus told no outright lies. He