

Downside UP

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Obama: Stay Your Course in Iraq; It's a Trap

We've had "victory." We've tried blaming Iran. Now we have "success." I am such a lucky fellow; I don't have to watch Fox News to know the latest propaganda from Pravda *a la* Bush. All I have to do is listen to the Republicans on the tennis porch drinking their beers and mouthing off after a match. I don't even have to read Charles Krauthammer's newspaper column the next day.

It's pathetic but as the presidential race heats up, those of us opposed to the Iraq War need to be clear about what has actually happened and the differences between what McCain and Obama are saying. Bush-McCain is setting a trap. We need to make the case for withdrawal now and no matter what.

The Bush Government coerced false information to start the war, lied about weapons of mass destruction to sell it to Congress and the American people, and prosecuted it with ignorance and arrogance. It has only achieved a reduced level of violence by putting warlords on the payroll and making temporary truces – not disarmaments – with sworn enemies. Now the Bush-McCain team is trying to make the American people believe that what we have is success and the only thing that would ruin this success would be withdrawal – leaving unsaid when a withdrawal might ever come – even in a "100 years."

What we have in Iraq today is not success. It is not even a precursor to success. Our invasion and botched occupation long ago set us up for failure. The continual Bush analogies to the liberation of France during World War II are ignorant. No country has ever treated a foreign invasion as liberation except when the invasion was to liberate the country from another foreign invader (France occupied by Nazi Germany). No matter how horrible their own government, people consistently defend their country first (Russia and Spain against Napoleon, Russia against Nazi Germany, Vietnam against France, Japan, and the U.S.).

I won't say that the Bush Government invaded Iraq to gain control of its oil. That may be a little crass even for the neo-cons who ran our foreign policy. Perhaps, in their ignorance, they actually believed that foreign invasion could be an instrument of democratization. But they surely did invade to gain leverage in the struggle for control of the oil rich Middle East. And it has all been a total disaster, costing over 4,000 American lives and 10 times that in casualties while losing what influence we had in the Middle East. Even our buddy Saudi Arabia disagrees with what we did.

Our invasion and occupation instigated the internal violence between Shiites and Sunnis and among various factions of each. It gave al-Qaeda, which was non-existent in Iraq before our invasion, the chance to portray itself as a liberator. These conflicts may be tamped down with bribery, and people like Muqtada al-Sadr may

step aside as he has done at least twice, but the prospect of violence will never go away so long as the country is occupied. The Bush-McCain Republicans are setting a trap for the Democrats by keeping "peace" and claiming "success" as long as they are in power. But the test of success is not what happens now but what happens after we leave. If the Democrats win the 2008 election and don't take us out by the end of 2009, all the blame for violence will be on them and they – and we -- will be stuck there still in 2012.

The Democrats must not be intimidated. They need to confront the lie that "victory" was ever possible and whatever mess which follows US withdrawal is the failure of George Bush and his armchair warriors. This war has not only cost the lives of thousands of our men and women, it has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. It is costing now, \$12 billion a month, mostly in so-called "emergency" appropriations outside the regular budget. According to Joseph Stiglitz, former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, it will ultimately cost \$1.5 trillion. This figure comes when you include costs like those hidden in the rest of the Pentagon budget, the care of wounded veterans for the rest of their lives, and "money to refurbish a military whose equipment and materiel have been greatly depleted."

Also long-term is the damage to our country's reputation, replacing freedom, democracy, and the Marshall Plan with a new image of arrogance and unilateralism, of name-calling and refusal to work even with allies, of persistent violations of human rights at home and abroad. For all the harm to our international reputation, just as bad is the long-term effect on our economy. Huge deficits have saddled our children and grandchildren with an enormous debt, undermining the dollar and contributing to the rise in the price of oil. (The lower the value of the dollar, the more Saudi Arabia and Colombia need to receive in dollar value to get the same amount back in their own currencies.) That this policy cuts off options for Democratic spending on social programs is a bonus for most Republicans, but Stiglitz estimates it is part of an ultimate economic cost of over \$3 trillion.

Delaying Withdrawal Would Close the Trap

We must get out of Iraq for our sake and the sake of the world. At home, we must focus on energy-saving strategies -- which are almost invisible even on the Democratic side of the aisle but the cheapest, quickest, and most effective way of reducing our dependence on oil. Laying waste to California and Florida beaches for oil, West Virginia for coal, Colorado for shale oil, and Alberta for tar sand oil, is not the place to start. Nor can alternative energy sources be ginned up overnight. But one florescent light in every American home could save enough energy to supply every home in Rhode Island and Delaware. Replacing every air conditioner in the country with the most efficient technology would be a good use of tax incentives. No one should be allowed to install or replace a heating system for their swimming pool without using solar power.

Abroad, we must be prepared to talk with anyone – anyone. Refusing to talk is just stupid. Heck, the Israelis are now talking with Syria and Hamas. After a few years of failed grandstanding, we talked with North Korea. We should be willing to talk with and listen openly and honestly to anyone about any solution. We do not ask them to give up violence or the nuclear option as a precondition for negotiations when violence and the threat of it is the only weapon they have against an aggressive enemy willing to strike unilaterally and preemptively.

The world is wary – and weary -- of our starting from the assumption that we are the good and the righteous while everyone else's motives are questionable. The Bush Government's decision to tie withdrawal from Iraq to oil rights for US oil companies is disgusting: it brings our motives into question once again -- and is probably being done in fear that a new Democratic administration would not make corporate oil rights a condition for withdrawal. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has suggested, the United States might negotiate a "residual" force in the event of an "external threat (e.g. Iran)." But the Iraqis have to work out a *modus vivendi* among themselves (or not) and our "success" only delays their addressing the roots of conflict.

In 2003, the Bush team invaded Iraq in such a rush because they were pretty sure that there were no weapons of mass destruction and, without WMD's, even they would have trouble justifying an invasion. In 2008, they are equally certain Iraq will explode if they try to get out so they will do anything to keep the lid on. But the Democrats did not create the mess and have no reason to buy into it by staying. In fact, they have every reason to put the blame where it belongs and get out as soon as possible. I hope Obama and the Democrats are smart and courageous enough to figure this out. It is time to save what's left of our lives, our money, and our sacred honor.

Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.