It’s Not A War That We Are Not Winning

by

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If President Bush is so unpopular, in large part because of the “war” in Iraq, why do the major presidential candidates—particularly the Democrats—have so little to offer by way of alternatives to the president’s course of action?

Sen. Hillary Clinton responds with little more than criticism of the president’s tactics. As Philip Stephens sees it (Financial Times, 6/8/07), she “speaks of America’s departure [from Iraq] and an end to the war as self-evidently coincident” without acknowledging that our disengagement (like our engagement) “will be a bloody, costly affair, deeply damaging US power and prestige in the Middle East and beyond.”

Sen. Barack Obama argues that most U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Iraq, but wants to build an even larger military, not reduce it. According to Fred Hiatt (Washington Post, 6/5/07), Obama is not all that far from Republican candidate Mitt Romney in offering a foreign policy approach that is “strikingly similar to Bush administration policy.” Both Obama and Romney “want bigger, not smaller, armed forces.” Their criticism “is not that Bush took on too much but that he accomplished so little.” We can, once again, says Obama, be an America “that battles immediate evils, promotes an ultimate good, and leads the world once more.”

In their early debates, writes David Broder, all 18 Republican and Democratic candidates showed evidence of “lacking a real-world clue . . . a remarkable ability to ignore the real-world consequences of many of the policies they were advocating” (Washington Post, 6/7/07).

Why is this the case? With popular disapproval of the president so strong, with the “war” going so poorly, and with America’s reputation sinking, why should presidential campaign contenders have so little to say that is new and realistic?
Pragmatic Americanism

The answer to those questions, in my view, is that Republicans and Democrats alike share the same basic convictions about America’s role in the world. The major complaint that critics of the president have is that he has not succeeded in accomplishing what he set out to do. Americans are pragmatists in their civil-religious nationalism. They don’t believe that the United States should fail. So if we are failing, we ought to quit doing what we are doing and find other ways to maintain our position as the sole superpower that leads the world.

If we were to formulate this common American faith in a few sentences, it would sound something like this: Americans are out to get things done, things that are best for us and for the world. We can succeed at anything if we take the right approach. We are the world’s lead nation; our military is stronger than all others; we will and we must defeat our enemies and lead the world to freedom and democracy.

Underlying these convictions is the American civil religion—a way of life built around faith in the preeminence of the United States in the world, built on confidence that we are the exceptional nation that has been called by god or destiny to lead the world into its bright future of prosperity and freedom. Anything that stands in the way or threatens that future will fail, and if the U.S. must rally its military to fight those who threaten that bright future, then it should do so.

The problem, however, with this view of America and the world is not only its ideological pretentiousness but the fact that it has, over many decades, increasingly oriented our approach to enemies and potential enemies in terms of military might.

But It’s Not War

Within hours of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush characterized the attacks as an act of war and that the United States would have to go to war to defend itself against terrorists. Before long, everything the U.S. did in response, whether in Afghanistan or later in Iraq, whether in building up homeland security or tracking down terrorist plots around the world, was characterized as part of the “war on terrorism.” Very few journalists, scholars, or politicians of either political party have challenged that characterization. Whether criticizing President Bush or arguing in support of him, the presidential candidates, except former senator John Edwards, continue to speak of our engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan in terms of war. For this reason, the American public has been led into an almost total misunderstanding of what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Very little of what the United States is now doing in Iraq and Afghanistan should be characterized as fighting a war. It is not a war in the sense that America’s military is fighting enemy military forces that threaten the United States and can be defeated by military means. What we are engaged in is not war in the sense that “victory” would
mean the defeat or surrender of a military enemy, after which Iraq would be able to return to peace and then, under our direction, become a stable state like Japan or Germany. It is not war in the sense that after our victory, terrorists would be defeated and turn over their weapons to our military. No, the conflict and dangers in Iraq and Afghanistan have a different character than international warfare as Americans typically think of it, even though the United States did initiate a military invasion of both countries in a manner that frames the continuing characterization of our involvement as warfare.

At the time of the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan was a failed state, or better said, a geographical territory with a highly inadequate, authoritarian, and unjust Taliban government that supported al Qaeda. Today, long after our military defeat of the Taliban, Afghanistan is still a failed state in which NATO troops are trying to play the role of police and a national guard to overcome civil strife and narco-violence, which flourish because there is no functioning nationwide government.

At the start of 2003, Iraq was a political territory ruled viciously by Saddam Hussein who was under constant pressure from both the U.S. Air Force, which was guarding no fly zones, and U.N. weapons inspectors. Now, more than four years after our destruction of Saddam’s regime, Iraq is still a failed state in which the American military, with a few allied forces, is trying to play the role of police and a national guard to overcome civil strife and terrorist acts, which flourish because there is no functioning national government.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States military is functioning in a near political vacuum created by the lack of indigenous governance even though we keep telling ourselves that fledgling democracies are emerging in both countries. We will not admit that ever since our military toppled the Taliban and Saddam Hussein we have failed to govern those countries adequately. Instead, we argue that we are fighting a war against enemies that threaten us and in so doing are buying time for “democratically elected” governments to come to maturity so they can govern. In both countries, however, we are neither governing adequately nor helping to build the kind of indigenous state institutions that can fulfill the responsibility of governing. The fundamental problem in both countries is the absence or inadequacy of domestic governance, and that is something our military efforts can do little to change.

Iraq is now ranked as the world’s second most unstable country, “ahead of war-ravaged or poverty-stricken nations such as Somalia, Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Congo, Afghanistan, Haiti and North Korea” (Washington Post, 6/19/07). And it is estimated that four million Iraqis have fled their country or been displaced internally, if not killed, since the U.S. invasion. Our military efforts in Iraq have, if anything, contributed to, rather than overcome, the problems of societal disorder.

The reason most critics of the president want to bring the troops home is because we are not winning the “war,” but they don’t seem to recognize that we have failed to
bring just government to Iraq whose former government we destroyed and in whose place we have propped up leaders who have little or no possibility of governing the territory in which our military forces are conducting operations.

Myths and Contradictions

This is where contradictions and confusions become rife. Since there is no functioning national government in Iraq, the Iraqi troops that the U.S. military is training have no authoritative civil institution controlling and directing them. Thus, the American military is either helping to create the only national organization that will be capable of governing Iraq—thus, a military dictatorship—or our military is training forces that will become the improved fighters within opposing factions that are close to, if not already involved in, a civil war.

There is also the contradiction expressed time and time again by President Bush when he says, on the one hand, that we can’t afford to fail in Iraq because the country would be taken over by terrorists who would pose an even greater threat to us than they do now. Yet, on the other hand and at the same time, he says that the Iraqi government, which we pretend is capable of governing, must rise to the challenge of governing because otherwise the U.S. will not continue indefinitely to stay and support it. If, however, for our own national security, we can’t afford to lose in Iraq, then keeping our troops there until they win is necessary regardless of whether the Iraqi government ever rises to the challenge of actually governing. On the other hand, if we are not going to keep our troops in Iraq if the Iraqi government fails to stand up to govern, then a failed state in Iraq will apparently not be so awful a threat to us after all. (See Steve Negus, “The Irreconcilable,” Financial Times, 6/7/07).

Those contradictions are only two of the evidences of confusion and misunderstanding about the American role in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another is the constantly repeated idea that the U.S. is fighting to bring democracy to parts of the world now ruled by dictators, terrorists, or other undemocratic forces. Yet since the start of our military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have relied heavily on some of the most undemocratic regimes in the region, including those in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt while actually inspiring the rise of terrorist groups and their successes throughout the Middle East and in many other parts of the world.

The evidence suggests, therefore, that the American concern to promote democracy outside our borders is quite subordinate to our aim to pursue American interests and to work with any ally that will help us do so. Yet our supposed national interests—whether to protect Israel, or to assure access to Middle East oil, or to retain our position of military superiority throughout the world—are being undermined by the very actions we are taking, chiefly because of our failure to build and strengthen good governments in places where we have been sending our military.
As Roula Khalaf points out (Financial Times, 6/22/07), “With Iraq looking increasingly impossible to rescue from civil war, Lebanon’s elected government under violent assault and the Palestinian territories under control of rival factions, the US’s promotion of democracy appears to have backfired.” And why? “Analysts argue that a common factor in Iraq, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon is that the democratic experiment was pursued while state institutions were simultaneously being weakened.” (See also the analysis by Robin Wright, Washington Post, 6/17/07).

Contradictions and confusion also arise from the disgraces and injustices of American practices in the Abu Ghaib and Guantanamo prisons, which have been key factors in leading many people and governments around the world to charge America with hypocrisy. In the name of promoting democracy and the rule of law, the U.S. has, for the stated reason of its own security, engaged in acts that violate international laws to which our country has committed itself. And in order to keep as much of this questionable or illegal activity as possible from the light of day, the Bush administration has not only done everything it can to keep the CIA from being bound by the anti-torture laws that bind our military but also used secret prisons in other parts of the world to interrogate those whom we would not treat similarly in our own country or in extraterritorial detention centers where the Red Cross and others regularly gain access.

The Elections May Be of Little Consequence

The hypocrisy just noted, in addition to our failure to establish peace and good government where the Bush administration has sent the military to fight “wars,” has helped produce an even wider array of problems across the Middle East. Iran and Syria have gained influence and status; Israel and the Palestinians are farther from peace than four years ago; Egypt and Saudi Arabia appear to be even less likely than before to make room for democracy in their own countries.

Given the fact that most of the Republican candidates for president are even more hawkish than George W. Bush on American military strength and that the Democratic candidates are not questioning either the goal of maintaining American military supremacy in the world or America’s right and responsibility to act in the same way that President Bush has acted, it would appear that a major change in American foreign policy is not likely to occur in the near future regardless of who is elected president in 2008.

How long will Americans remain committed to a view of the world that obscures reality and leads us into deeper and deeper contradictions and misunderstandings? If the genuinely important international cooperative struggle against terrorism should be strengthened (and not misidentified as war), how long will Americans support the ever increasing build up of the American military, which is largely helpless to build sound governments in the world? After all, American military capability is not weakening. Fareed Zakaria explains that in the past five years, the U.S. “has ramped up defense spending by $187 billion—more than the combined military budgets of China, Russia,
India and Britain.” And in addition to that we have “created a Department of Homeland Security that now spends more than $40 billion a year.” How long will it take for Americans to realize that for all our military superiority in the world, our actual ability to influence international events is declining, due in part to the growing non-military power of other countries in the world, including China, India, Russia, and the European Union?

There is more to foreign policy and building a stable and just international order than can be accomplished by military means. We and our elected officials need to wake up to this reality and move toward a more balanced exercise of American responsibility in the world. If that does not begin to happen in 2008, when will it begin?