



Misfortunes of War

Posted GMT 8-27-2008 13:57:46

A funny thing happened this summer: John McCain taunted Barack Obama into making a trip to Iraq, whereupon the press looked around and finally noticed what those who were paying attention had known for some months now. The country portrayed for the last four years by the press and the Democrats as Vietnam-in-the-Desert is doing much better, what with al Qaeda on the run, the Sunnis and Shias coming together, the Shia militias largely defeated, and the war itself looking more or less ... won.

"The combat phase finally is ending," trilled the Associated Press, which had been warning of doom only weeks earlier. "The United States is now winning the war that two years ago had seemed lost. ...People are expressing a new confidence in their security forces. ..Parks are filled every weekend with families playing." Was this good news for McCain, who had staked his career on calling for the surge when all appeared hopeless? Well, no. But it was, apparently, good news for Obama, as less stress in Iraq made the world seem less threatening, made his lack of experience in foreign relations appear less disturbing, and made voters more likely to feel safe taking chances on him. When Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki said that Obama's plan for a 16-month-long phased withdrawal of American troops struck him as not an illogical timeline, it seemed yet another leg up for the audacious contender. For McCain, it was the old, unfair rule that to solve a problem was to make oneself seem redundant, as shown by the dismissal in 1945 of British prime minister Winston Churchill.

But wait! If the war is now "won," it may help Obama, but doesn't it also help President Bush? His catastrophic, failed, mess of a war in Iraq--the worst decision ever made, by the worst president ever (as the ranters tell us)--was supposed to be the battering ram that would break the Republican hold on the White House, the core of the case Democrats intended to make that his administration had been a disaster like no other in history, Vietnam cubed. When Bush doubled down with the surge in early 2007, Democrats placed a huge bet on failure and sat back to enjoy and cash in their winnings. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate majority leader Harry Reid released a joint letter that said a surge would be useless; Senators Joe Biden and Chuck Hagel introduced a resolution opposing the buildup; votes of no confidence followed in rapid succession. "We are going to pick up seats as a result of this war," Reid exulted. Democrats in the Senate spent much of their time forcing a series of votes designed to get their opponents on record as backing the war and the president. In June 2007, Reid declared the war lost.

By the end of that summer, disturbed by some hint that better news might be coming, Democrats tried a preemptive strike on the testimony to Congress of General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. "Dead flat wrong," Biden pronounced their assessment, before it had even been delivered. Rahm Emanuel predicted a report deserving of a "Nobel Prize for creative statistics or the Pulitzer for fiction." Hillary Clinton said the reports of improvement in Iraq required a "willing suspension of disbelief." Signs of success gave Democrats the vapors. In the face of an optimistic report from General Jack Keane, one of the principal authors of the surge strategy, Representative Nancy Boyda of Kansas became so unnerved that she fled from the hearing. "There was only so much that you could take until we in fact had to leave the room for a while," she said.

If the mere possibility of small signs of progress could so unnerve Democrats last summer, the party might want to lie down and rest for a while as it contemplates a convention, a campaign, and an election to follow, with no failed war to run on, and no George Bush to blame for it. If the war has been won, somebody has to have won it. They can still claim the war failed (in spite of succeeding), or is likely to flare up again at any moment, but that makes Obama's lack of experience still more disturbing. On the other hand, if Iraq is now tame enough to trust Obama to mess with, it means that the president has done something right. Or does it? Can a commander in chief be detached from a victory? Can Obama be trusted if there isn't a victory? Can the president be losing a war while the country is winning it? These are the small contradictions the party will have to explain.

Meanwhile, the party is losing its signature issue, losing the use of the president as an all-purpose piñata, and has to channel the wrath of its base into alternative venues that may lack the original's pop and oomph. Added to this is the fact that the Democrats' exertions last year to get Republicans on record supporting the surge now seem to have been a complete waste of effort, as these votes are now assets, and Democrats are the ones being asked to explain why they voted to block it. When Harry Reid laid his traps for an "Iraq Summer," this was not quite the outcome he sought.

The conventional view is that the success of the surge has leveled the field between McCain and Obama, leaving each with one "good"

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and one "bad" call apiece: Obama with his opposition to the war in 2002 (which McCain supported), and McCain with his vote for the surge in 2007 (which Obama opposed). Opinion polls tend to sustain this division, noting that while Americans feel that the surge has been working--and think for the first time in years that the larger war on terror is being won by their country--they still think by something close to a two-to-one margin that the war in Iraq has been a mistake.

This is the good news in the eyes of the Democrats. The good news for the Republicans is that the same polls show that these views go along with the mistaken and outdated conclusion that the war in Iraq has been lost. Polls taken as recently as May and June showed that 54 percent of respondents thought victory in Iraq was not possible; 61 percent thought Iraq would never become a democracy; 62 percent thought the war was going "badly" or "very badly." But those numbers reflect the state of affairs in October, November, and December of 2006, the dark night of the war that coincided with and was the cause of the Democrats' sweep of the 2006 midterms, when violence peaked, and civil war seemed imminent.

In the spring of 2007, the surge met and merged with the Anbar Awakening. Before long, al Qaeda was fleeing from the Sunni-held provinces, the Shia started to turn on their own sectarian radicals, and Sunnis were rejoining the army and government. Late in the summer, casualty rates started to plummet. At the end of September 2007, Bartle Bull became the first journalist to use the w word in print and in public, titling a piece in the Times of London, "How We've Won the War in Iraq." "The country is whole," Bull wrote. "It has embraced the ballot box. It has created a fair and popular constitution. It has avoided civil war. .???.???. Iraq's violence has largely become local and criminal. .???.???. The violence, while tragic, has ceased being political, and is therefore no longer nearly as important as it was."

In the event, the decision of both the Sunnis and Shia to turn their backs both on jihad and on sectarian violence was an act of remarkable political consequence, creating the Iraqi center that Bush had hoped for when he invaded in 2003, but that had not yet existed. In 2008, the laggard Iraqi government finally began to cohere. In April, the overwhelmingly Shiite Maliki government did the unexpected and attacked and defeated the Shiite Mahdi Army in the city of Basra, a definitive act that impressed the Sunnis enough to make them want to come back to the national government. This was the state of affairs that prevailed in late July when Obama made his celebrated visit to Baghdad, and prompted the assertion of victory just days later by the Associated Press.

The AP story was the first inkling most Americans had of Iraq's real conditions and came several months after the last set of polls on Iraq had come out. Over time, if conditions remain as they are, the AP-Bartle Bull view of Iraq will probably replace the 2006 view in the minds of the public, though how soon, and to what extent, is less clear. Some people will always believe that the cost and the chaos of 2004-2006 make the war an epic Bush failure, but if the opinion of others rests on the view that the war was lost, their minds over time may be changed. This means that while the success of the surge is now established beyond refutation, the verdict on the war itself may be open to revision. It will be up to McCain and his backers to make their case strongly, and it may have only a marginal impact on this election. But in a close race, even the margins can be important. And it is no longer a wholly lost cause.

For Obama, his vote on the surge is quite a complication, and one that he never foresaw. Some claim it won't hurt him, as it will have been cast almost two years ago come November, and elections are fought over the future, not the past. But try telling that one to Hillary Clinton, who lost the Democratic nomination on the strength of the go-to-war vote that she cast five years earlier, and that her party's voters refused to forgive or forget. The final insult was that she refused to apologize for it, or at least to apologize for it abjectly enough to please Democratic primary voters. And no one hammered her for it more than Obama, who providentially enough is now being asked to explain his against-the-surge vote in 2007, or at least to admit he was wrong. If he refuses, as USA Today said in a July 24 editorial, he is clearly denying the obvious. But if he admits it, he is compromising his campaign's rationale. In the place of experience, of which he has little, he is basing his claim to leadership on his superior judgment, shown by his opposition to the invasion, expressed in 2002 when he was still a state senator, and unable to vote on the issue. But this is called into question by his stance on the surge, which he was able to vote on, and in which case the judgment of John McCain (and of the president) was demonstrably better than his.

As Slate's John Dickerson noted, it was the most important vote Obama has cast. "As Obama pointed out regularly during the Democratic primaries," he said, "a person's past vote tells you something about his or her judgment. Obama talked a lot about the clarity of his judgment in opposing the Iraq war." On the surge, however, he flunked his own standard. "When he voted against the surge in January 2007, he claimed on more than one occasion that it would lead to increased casualties and sectarian violence. It didn't. How'd he get that one wrong?"

As Dickerson notes, that's not all he got wrong--he's been mistaken in nearly everything he said on Iraq since he came to the Senate. He claimed that the Anbar Awakening took place as a result of the Democrats' congressional victories, but it began in September 2006, two months before the voting took place. He opposed not only the troop surge, but the strategic changes that took place along with it, that did so much to enable the victory. He said the American military had nothing to do with the Anbar Awakening or with the retreat of the Sadr militia, something denied by the military and by the Iraqi Sunnis themselves. He was also wrong in his predictions of what would occur. "In January 2007, Obama claimed that the Iraqi government would make no hard choices if the United States stayed," wrote Dickerson, noting however that "they have made hard choices," such as Maliki's decision to attack and defeat Sadr and his Mahdi Army. This of

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course casts doubt on the senator's current projections. "If Obama was wrong about the tactical gains that would be made by the new strategy, and wrong about how the Iraqi political leaders will react, can his larger theory about how Iraqis will respond to a troop pullout remain intact?"

It can't, and neither can his claim to superior judgment. Picture this ad, as it might be run by the McCain forces sometime this fall:

Cut to Obama, praising his own judgment.

Cut to Obama, opposing the surge, repeatedly, as it is bound to prove useless.

Cut to Obama after the surge has succeeded, claiming he had always said that adding additional troops would improve security.

Cut to Obama telling ABC News's Terry Moran that he would vote against the surge all over again, as he was opposed to the president's overall strategy.

Cut to Obama again, touting the strength of his intuition and judgment.

From the GOP's standpoint, the ads write themselves.

Such are the perils of seeking advantage in this strange new political age. McCain needs Iraq to be won, as it was his war and he knew how to fight it, but not won so thoroughly as to be handed off risk-free to the neophyte challenger. Obama needs the war to be won to make it safe to elect him, but if it is won it indicts his own poor judgment and deprives his party of its favorite issue and most emotional line of attack on his rival, and on Bush.

McCain and his party at least wanted to win the war all along, but for Obama and many Democrats, the sudden lurch from the catastrophic Bush failure to unexpected victory has caused incoherence. Last year, in damage control, Chuck Schumer declared that the surge itself had been counterproductive: "The violence in Anbar has gone down despite the surge, not because of the surge," he insisted, without quite explaining it. "It wasn't that the surge brought peace." Nancy Pelosi said the surge hadn't worked, and then said it worked only because Iran let it. To Time's Joe Klein, the surge is whipped cream on top of the pile of excrement that is the war, a debacle that somehow produced undeniable victory. "The reality is that neither Barack Obama nor Nuri al-Maliki nor most anybody else believes that the Iraq war can be 'lost' at this point," Klein wrote on July 22, a day after he compared the war effort to fertilizer, and the same day he called the war he said had been won a "disastrous" enterprise. Obama tried the same thing when he called the surge a tactical success within a larger strategic debacle, but a success he would still vote against--knowing in advance it would still be successful--if once again given the chance.

A commander in chief who votes against the success of his own armed forces? Is this the judgment--and change--that we can believe in?

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The Weekly Standard

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