

Winning the Peace in Iraq...

And saving the soul of America

I am certain we are all familiar with the litany concerning the war in Iraq: we went in with no clear idea how we would "win the peace." This has become bedrock on both the left and the right. In essence, everyone in our government and the opposition to it believes we cannot win the peace in Iraq. They believe we will be stuck there for years, if not decades, and we'll watch American men and women bleed for neo-con hubris and dominion theologians' delusional dreams of a kingdom of God on Earth.

Before I continue, I really need to make clear some of my biases. I have a degree in history and in the quarter century since earning it I have read extensively on a variety of subjects covering history, military history, religion, science and human culture. Such are the joys of being an author that I can pretty much define reading about anything as *work*. Of late I have read voluminously about the history of the Middle East, Afghanistan and the world since 9/11. All wisecracks aside about the fact that our President would be stumped reading a Bazooka Bubblegum cartoon all the way through, I know I have a better grasp on the situation in the Middle East than he'll ever have. Ditto his cabinet.

I have never served in the military, but my brother is career Army and is currently deployed in the Middle East. He's working his ass off so doesn't have time for much more than cursory notes, and I get the barest of sketches of the situation over there from him. Moreover, we are like night and day in political thought, so nothing that follows is from him, nor has he seen, approved or even commented on what follows. I have learned, from him, and from the plethora of histories and biographies I've read, a lot about combat, its dangers and terrors, and the bravery of those who choose to get into harm's way. It might be said that fools rush in where angels fear to tread; but it's also the highly motivated, dedicated and unimaginatively brave who march right in there. I could not be more proud of them.

It is because of my pride in them that I write what follows. There are a couple of things about the whole war on terrorism that are patently obvious to me (and other folks with enough neurons to form a synapse) but seem to elude the Executive branch of our

government. Curiously enough, Osama bin Laden agrees with me on these points, and if that doesn't scare you, I can't imagine what would. (Actually, I can, but the chances of John Ashcroft and Pat Robertson sharing a passionate kiss are somewhat lower than those of George Bush having read any of the books that will eventually show up in his Presidential Library.)

First off, the bureaucrats in Washington, DC, have far too much time on their hands. As painful as it might be for all of us, I'd like you to think back to 24 October 2001, a mere six weeks after more than 3,000 people died in a series of attacks on the American homeland. We were all in shock. We were all looking for substantive ways to help. We donated money and blood, we packed our loved ones off to war, and we were united as a nation. And in Congress, House Resolution 3162, the USA PATRIOT act, was introduced.

Allow me to quote from the bill's second page:

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE AND TABLE OF CONTENTS.

(a) **SHORT TITLE.**—This Act may be cited as the
''Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing
Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and
Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001''.

Do you see it there? While we're all pulling together to help safeguard the nation, some House staffer is charged with the duty of making up an *acronym* for USA PATRIOT! When efforts should have been focused on making a good bill, on learning what went wrong and how to fix it, we have people worrying about being *clever*.

As long as politics is about garnering and maintaining power; vanity, arrogance and hubris will distract people from doing what needs to be done. Georges Clemenceau said, "War is too important a matter to be left to the military." I would add a caveat: Peace and security are too important to be left in the hands of politicians.

If we want to win the peace in Iraq *and* save the soul of America, we're going to have to force our leaders to do what is right.

A second point is utterly vital. Everyone on the left and the right agrees on certain precepts, but they fail to understand the significance of them. It is as if people agreed that rain is when water falls from the sky, but then fail to understand that it will make them wet if they go out in it. It is this disconnect from reality that prevents our leaders from seeing an obvious and viable course of action. Of course, since these are men and women who don't know what real life is like—don't have to buy milk and eggs, don't have to pay for health insurance, don't have to pay for haircuts, who get huge fees every time they eat a rubber chicken and give a speech at some dinner, how could they understand what it's like to groan when the bills roll in?

This is relevant because the first precept accepted as gospel is simple: *poverty* is the root source of terrorists and terrorism. I don't disagree. If you've got no job, no money, no

prospects for the future, strapping explosives to yourself and earning a one-way ticket to Paradise doesn't seem like that bad an idea. Add in the fact that there's an invader in your country, the fact that they may have bombed the heck out of your town, killed kin, taken away your job and utterly humiliated you in the eyes of the world, and you can see some motivation brewing there. I don't agree with or condone terrorism, but I sure can understand where it's coming from and why it's so virulent.

George Bush has stated, repeatedly, that our enemies hate us for our freedoms. This is patent nonsense. We have no better an authority on all this than Osama bin Laden himself. In his 23 February 1998 *fatwa* (**Jihad against Jews and Crusaders**), he cites three reasons for going to war with America.

- 1) Since the first Gulf War we've occupied the home of the most important Holy Sites in the Moslem world.
- 2) Since the first Gulf War, the sanctions against Iraq had caused great suffering among the Iraqi people and there was no end in sight for them.
- 3) America continued to aid Israel and allowed Israel to oppress the Moslem population in the area.

No where in that document does he say he hates our freedoms. In fact, what he'd clearly like is freedom from American cultural oppression. He's got a point there. Face it, when *Baywatch* is the best known American entertainment export in the world and is shown in over 140 worldwide markets, it certainly gives a view of America that suggests the profligate use of sunscreen and our utter moral decay. (Oddly enough, I suspect John Ashcroft and bin Laden have much the same opinion of the show.)

Why is the show so popular? Why do kids the world over know who Michael Jordan is, and wear stuff from our sports teams? Because they love and desire our freedom. The USA is where it's at. The streets may no longer be paved with gold, but with Pam Anderson wandering around next to naked, who's going to be looking at the streets? More importantly, America offers hope because there are few people in the world who don't know someone who has come to America and makes enough money to send some back home, or to send for relatives to join them in their success.

A third precept is also covered in the bin Laden statement. He notes that our "aims behind these wars are religious and economic. . ." I want to ignore the religious half of that comment because religion clouds the issue at hand in ways that wastes an incredible amount of energy. (Besides, I want that to be a subject of an essay later on.) Suffice it to say, actively sending Christian missionaries into the Middle East is about as intelligent as sending people with torches to help folks soaked in gasoline.

The thing that is important here, and that most people have missed, is that Osama bin Laden and his followers—crazed and as marginal as they are compared to the Moslem mainstream—fear America's economic might. And the President agrees. Over and over he points out that we've got the strongest economy in the world. After the terrorist

attacks, his prescription for keeping America safe was for all of us to open up our wallets and spend like sailors on shore leave (or like Tom DeLay in redistricting Texas). We all agree that the United States is an economic powerhouse and, while our military packs a considerable punch, our economy is likely our best weapon ever.

I would also point out that while there are many who decry American cultural Imperialism, short of America becoming completely isolationist and even monkish, our culture is a juggernaut that will continue to roll. We cannot become isolationist because our economy and culture depend on foreign sources of oil. America has over 700 military installations around the world, and a lot of them are positioned to maintain stability in nations that provide us that lifeblood. Until or unless we shut off our dependence on oil, we can't withdraw from the world.

This means that our economy needs direction, and we need to put it on the path where it will do the best for our interests. I firmly believe that we can use the American economy *and* the generous American spirit to win the peace in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because we all agree that poverty is the wellspring of terrorism; because people, like it or not, see America as a bastion of hope, and because our economy is strong and hideously wasteful, I propose a simple and direct plan to win the peace.

I call it ***Operation Garage Sale.***

The idea is simple. Americans everywhere should gather together all the junk we offer for garage sales and send it to Iraq. Clothes, appliances, golf clubs, toys, plates, cookware, you name it, we send it. If the people are so poor they don't have a pot to piss in, we give them one. If they don't have shoes or clothes, we provide them with same. We move bicycles and books, cds and dvds, furniture, pens, pencils, paper, old computers, old cameras, all the stuff we have accumulated over the years and get it the heck out of here and over there.

I won't be flip and point out that just sorting out all this crap is enough work to employ all 25,000,000 Iraqis, but let's put some things in perspective. If you've got a waffle iron, a toaster, a fridge or even a simple lamp, you've got an incentive to ask folks not to go blowing up power stations. Moreover, if you're getting clothes and other household items for free, that frees up money for you to buy medicines and food and other necessities of life. And, let's be straight about this: as much as you might want to hate America for what it's done to your nation, it's kinda hard to hate folks who are giving you the things you need to be able to lead a good life. It gives you incentive to work and make life better. It's the helping hand that they're not getting right now.

There are those who will say this plan won't work, but the fact is that it *does* work. During the initial occupation of Iraq, US forces were allowed to use cash they'd seized as payments to workers who built schools, repaired facilities and otherwise helped put the country back together. As long as folks were working and getting paid, the insurgency stalled. It's only after the money ran out and folks went back to grinding poverty that the terrorists began to find traction.

Such generosity is also culturally understandable within the Moslem world, since their faith calls upon them to make charitable donations. Gifts from us to them they'd understand far better than promises, bullets and poverty. Moreover, it would be a fulfillment of our promise to their people, that life would be better post-Saddam.

And, on top of that, the terrorists are going to have a hell of a time matching our generosity. Sure, Osama bin Laden is reported to have a fortune of \$100,000,000 or so. *Big deal!* That's chicken feed. If every man, woman and child in America donated just one dollar, we'd have \$270,000,000 or so to play with, make it \$10 per, and we could hand each Iraqi as much donated loot as they could carry *and* \$100 cash. Think about it: refrain from just two half-caf, soy-milk lattes a *month*, send that money to Iraq, and they wouldn't have a problem with poverty.

And just imagine what we'd produce if we cashed in all the loose change we have laying around!

But wait, there's more. This plan has three very direct upside effects for America.

1) We all know you catch more flies with honey than vinegar; so we'll be making friends and keeping our soldiers from being blown up.

2) We will get all of that crap out of our houses. That will give us more space, which reduces stress. We'll also get a sense of well-being from making such charitable donations. Over and above that, we'll also know that we, the civilian population, have been directly responsible for doing something that helps the war effort.

3) (And this one should make the President's socks roll right up and down) We are Americans. What do we do when we have more space and feel good about ourselves? **We go shopping!** That's right, we'll buy new stuff to replace the old stuff, which means we'll have *more* old stuff to send off. The cycle will continue, prompting a new round of retail spending that will get the economy going again.

Are there going to be nay-sayers? Sure, and I see their objections falling into five areas.

1) **We would be giving aid and comfort to the enemy.** Anyone who holds this opinion needs to face some facts. First, we broke their nation and we really need to clean up our mess. Second, unless you want to declare 25,000,000 men, women and children enemy combatants and put a bullet in each of their heads (shame on you for thinking that is a good idea), we're going to have to deal with them somehow. **Operation Garage Sale** is in perfect keeping with Christian teaching about loving the enemy, turning the other cheek and showing charity. Remember that "least of my brethren" passage? In the most base terms, if a box of my old t-shirts can stop someone from shooting a Marine, I'm all for bribing them. If we get more good out of the whole thing, and we will, so much the better.

2) **Charity begins at home.** It's true that there are plenty of charities right here in the USA that provide for our less fortunate citizens. According to a report on National Public

Radio however, up to *half* of the clothing donations made to charities here are sold to brokers who sell them in lots to clothing resellers in a variety of third world nations. The money they make from sales is used to cover operating expenses. While **Operation Garage Sale** might cut down on donations to them, the simple fact of the matter is that we have more than enough crap in our homes to satisfy both the domestic *and* foreign markets. (Over the past three years I have culled clothing and other household items for charitable donations multiple times, and I always come up with more stuff.) Our attics and basements, closets, garages, storage buildings and storage lockers are brimming with stuff we no longer want or need. Let's get rid of all of it and help make someone else's life better.

3) **Cultural Imperialism is bad and will ruin Iraq.** This is utter drivel. As I mentioned above, there is no stopping the American cultural juggernaut, but people who are free of material want can decide for themselves how they will interface with that juggernaut. Wearing a Phoenix Suns t-shirt doesn't turn you away from Islam. Riding an American bicycle isn't going to morph you into Donald Trump. Using a Walkman won't turn you into a ravaging Britney Spears fan, nor will it make you eat at Hooters, read supermarket tabloids or make you forget soccer in favor of baseball. By giving the Iraqi people what they need to actually *live*, we allow them to decide how they want to restructure their society—and we've seen, so far that keeping them hungry, cold and in fear of catching a bullet isn't doing that much for them. Without allowing them a chance to make their own decisions, there is no chance they can survive our full cultural onslaught, so we really have no choice *but* to help them in this matter if you want a recognizable Iraq in the future.

4) **Osama bin Laden proclaimed his *fatwa* precisely because America's economic strength was attacking Islam.** Uh huh, and he'll hate this. But then, he'll hate *anything* we do short of rolling over, dying and, oh, by the way, giving him control over the territories Islam had before the Mongols, Crusaders and internal bickering ripped the grand Moslem empire apart. Being concerned about what pisses Osama bin Laden off right now is closing the barn door after the horses are gone. Look, we won the Cold War by spending the Soviet Union into bankruptcy. Let's do that with him and his supporters. He wants to go one-on-one with the greatest economy known to man, let him. Face it, he takes another shot at America while we're helping everyone out, he's going to shrink his base to the point where he's going to be playing a lot of solitaire.

5) **What's in it for us?** The *us* here is not the American people or our soldiers, it's politicians and industrialists. I'm not a conspiracy monger, but we have to face facts: a lot of people are making a boatload of money servicing the war, so they have a vested interest in keeping us in the region for as long as they can.

Halliburton, for example, has "cost plus" contracts that guarantee a profit. Follow this scenario: You own a truck. An oil change costs \$20.00, so you get to charge the Feds \$22.00, profit of 10%. A truck, however, costs \$20,000. So, if you don't do the oil change (profit \$2) and allow the truck's engine to seize because of it, you buy a *new* truck (profit \$2000.00). And your buddies in the truck producing business make their piece of the profit on the truck, and everyone is happy.

Um, except the taxpayers, who are footing the bill for this nonsense. But, then, with the tax cuts in place, the folks profiting from the sales aren't in the group that pays a fair share, so it's the middle class (i. e. the folks who would be making the trucks had their jobs not been out-sourced to the third world) who pay the freight.

Now, in that scenario, you have to know which way a business is going to go: \$2 is less than \$2000.00, so we go with new truck. In this whole charity business, corporations are not going to profit. What they'd rather do is get the government to buy *new* stuff and give it away, so they can make their profit.

It's stupid and wasteful and, unfortunately, the reason this plan will founder.

Unless. . .

Okay, here comes the hard part of all of this. (You knew it was coming.) *We* have to make this plan work. Exactly *how* do we do this?

1) Share the link to this essay with as many people as possible. This *includes* folks who are in the media. In the last election we saw how powerful the internet could be in getting information out to folks. Let's use that power again to really make a change in the lives of people who, no matter how you want to look at it, have been having a tough life for decades.

2) Print out copies of the essay, include a cover letter expressing your support, and mail them (snail-mail, not e-mail) to your Representatives and Senators, Governors and local legislators. Sure, it will cost a bit of time, and a couple lattes' worth of stamps, but until and unless leaders start getting dealer-weight of paper showing up in their offices, they aren't going to notice a thing. (You can even send copies to the White House, though it's written at a reading level that will baffle the "Ed-ju-ka-shun" President.)

3) Get together with friends and community groups to plan out how you will collect donations. Even *if* we don't get Federal support for this program, there are local and more direct ways of getting material over to Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, my brother's unit has adopted an orphanage and all the soldiers have solicited donations from friends and family. I have to believe that they are not alone in the US military, and someone within your community will know someone who is serving over there and has made a similar adoption. The stuff will get there *if* we resolve to make this happen.

4) Adopt simple guidelines in your life that will bring home to you and your family just how lucky we are, and how much we have to give to the rest of the world. I freely admit that I am a clothes *slut*. I like wearing good clothes and having a wide variety of things to choose from. The fact is, however, that I could go a full month without needing to do laundry. A friend pointed this out to me, and it scared me.

I now have a simple rule: one comes in, one goes out. (With shirts it's two go out for every one that comes in.) Even if you decide you need casual clothes, business clothes, holiday

(aka *fat*) clothes, workout clothes and special clothes (I'll leave that to your imagination—and enjoy the fact that Ashcroft is now squirming), I'd bet most folks reading this can trim at least a week's worth of shirts, pants and underclothes out of their current wardrobe without blinking an eye.

There are two things that are consistent with the Bush administration. The first is that they have done everything within their ability to retain power, refrain from sharing power and to protect those with whom they have shared power. Instead of giving us realistic information about the terrorist threats, they've given us a Crayola system of alerts, we're told attacks are imminent when the government itself doesn't believe the people producing the warnings and we're told that terrorist sources have said that if we increase vigilance, this will serve as a deterrent to future acts of terrorism. (Good thing it didn't take a genius to figure that last thing out, since the government seems woefully short of them.) In his resignation manifesto John Ashcroft declared that the job of making sure America was safe had been accomplished and Tom Ridge said that while he could offer no proof of it, he was sure his efforts had prevented terrorist attacks.

And I'm sure that wearing tin-foil beanies will stop the Martians from taking over people's brains, but I've no proof of that, either.

Despite their desire to concentrate power in the hands of a few individuals who could not, even with guns held to their heads, utter the sentence, "You're wrong, Mr. President," they have not always been successful. George W. Bush did everything he could to resist the establishment of the 9/11 Commission. Because of popular support he . . . well, I won't call it a *flip-flop*. . . straight away *caved-in* and got behind it. And initially, his support for the implementation of the Commission's recommendations worked as well as Janet Jackson's costume at the last Superbowl.

It falls to us, the American people, to reunite in a just and honorable cause that shows our best nature to the world *and* helps bring an end to a conflict that threatens men, women and children at home and abroad. The government had no plan for winning the peace because they didn't believe it could be won, nor did it serve their interests to see it won. They're not the ones bleeding there. They're not the ones dying there. They are not the ones who need the comfort and support *we* can provide.

American, once again, needs to open its heart to embrace those who are less fortunate, saving them and ourselves at the same time.

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