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Leaving Iraq

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 19, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The pictures from last night could not have been more different from those we all witnessed on May 1, 2003. Last night, as the last combat troops left Iraq, everything was understatement. In 2003, standing before the infamous ?Mission Accomplished? banner on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, George W. Bush told us that major combat operations were over. They weren?t. Nor did they end last night. What ended last night was the U.S. military having the principle responsibility for the conduct of combat operations. Our combat troops have left. Whatever fighting remains to be fought, will be fought by the Iraqis.

Last night, ennui seemed to be the emotion of the day. The original war aims have long since been discredited, but following the maxim ?You break it, you buy it,? there has been a belief that America could not leave Iraq until a political settlement was reached. Many on the left argue that no such political settlement has been achieved. On MSNBC, Howard Fineman warned that future pictures of chaos in Iraq would make it impossible for the Obama administration to claim anything like a victory in Iraq. Mr. Fineman over-estimates the moral compass of the American people. My hunch is that if, in the ensuing months, Americans see pictures of renewed carnage in Iraq, they will simply say, ?Thank God it?s not our boys.?

It is true that there is not stable government in Iraq today. Indeed, there is currently no government at all. But, it is also remarkable that the political stalemate occasioned by the inconclusive election results has not resulted in civil war. How many governments did the Fourth Republic have after World War II? The opposing political parties in Iraq have so far failed in negotiations to form a government, but they have not resorted to arms, despite occasional acts of violence. For this, much of the credit goes to George Bush. However wrong he was to go to war in Iraq in the first place, President Bush?s decision to approve the ?surge? recommended by General David Patraeus, was the correct one. And, it must be pointed out that then-Senator Barack Obama opposed the surge.

The motives of politicians are ever a mixed bag, and that holds for the leaders of both parties. I have never believed that Bush brought us into war for oil, as some leftie conspiracy theorists hold. I do not believe he took us into war in Iraq as any kind of payback for Saddam Hussein?s attempt on his father, George H.W. Bush?s life. On the evidence we have so far, I think George W. Bush felt that the war in Afghanistan was insufficiently demonstrative of America?s intent to take-on Islamic extremism and those around him convinced him that more needed to be done in that part of the world to demonstrate American resolve. In Saddam Hussein Bush found a true, evil villain, and although Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11, who could deny that the world would be better without him? That said, I suspect that when we know the full history of the lead-up to the war in Iraq, the person who will come out looking the worst, a place for which there is some competition, will be former Vice-President Dick Cheney. Feith, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and the rest all followed Cheney?s lead. And, I do not doubt that all the President?s men saw the electoral benefit of being seen as a successful wartime president.

I believe, too, that Democrats who opposed the war were motivated by sound, if sometimes flawed, reasons. Gen. Wesley Clark (full disclosure ? I worked on Gen. Clark?s brief campaign in 2004) warned in the months before the war in Iraq that the most foreseeable result of an American invasion of Iraq would be the

strengthening of Iran?s position, and that in the long term, Iran was a greater threat to American interests than Saddam. Other Democrats (Dennis Kucinich comes to mind) were not so discriminating and invoked all manner of foolishness in opposing the war, discrediting the principled and intelligent opposition of people like Gen. Clark. That said, when it came time to vote for the surge or not, it is difficult not to conclude that Obama and other Democrats had an eye on how their vote would play with the Democratic primary electorate as much as the considered whether the surge would work.

Neither party escapes from the story of the Iraq War unscathed. But, neither party left Iraq last night. The U.S. military did. Whatever one?s political opinions about the war, there is one extraordinarily happy phenomenon that accompanied this war: Unlike Vietnam, no one blamed the troops for the mistakes of the politicians. When veterans returned from Vietnam, they were harassed and called foul names; even the most goofy leftie Democrat has gone out of their way to commend the troops. This is not only important, it is just. The military was given not one nearly impossible task, but many nearly impossible tasks. They could not succeed in the way George W. Bush thought they had on May 1, 2003. No such success was possible. But, they have succeeded in every reasonable task they have been given. Indeed, it is often forgotten that the most complicated task in warfare is an orderly withdrawal, and so last night?s final exit was yet another military success.

The difference between Bush and Obama is more than a difference in policy. There is a different conception of leadership at work here. First a thin Pope, then a fat one. If Bush tended to bradaggadocio, Obama is all understatement. Both traits have their difficulties. Especially in wartime, the traits of a braggart are unhealthy, not least in the case of Bush where they also had the element of farce: Unlike his father, who was a decorated pilot in World War II, George W. Bush successfully evaded service in Vietnam, as did Cheney, and men with no experience of war are especially ill advised to demonstrations of martial valor when they are sending others into war. Obama?s challenge is that part of wartime leadership in a democracy is to keep the demos on board, especially when the goals of military conflict are remote and opaque but essential and the costs are evident and close at hand. It is a good thing that we have a Commander-in-Chief who actually thinks through the consequences of his actions, but that is only part of his charge. Given the fact that the Catholic moral tradition views armed conflict only as a last resort, Obama?s flaw is less morally troubling. But, both political parties have much to contemplate as the U.S. combat role in Iraq comes to an end. It may be a vain hope, but a hope nonetheless, that now the nation can move forward to a less acrimonious consideration of the limits and the occasional necessity of American armed intervention in the affairs of the world.

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