

AUGUST 1

Operation Withdrawal Scam

A few days ago, the White House launched a new phase of its propaganda siege for the Iraq war. The opening salvo came on July 27, when the commander of American forces in Iraq said that continuation of recent trends would make possible "some fairly substantial reductions" of U.S. troop levels in the spring and summer of 2006. Those reductions, Gen. George Casey proclaimed, will happen "if the political process continues to go positively and if the development of the security forces continues to go as it is going."

Gen. Casey's statement, which made big news, was the start of a media offensive likely to last for the next 15 months, until the congressional elections. We might call it Operation Withdrawal Scam.

Overall, the strategy is double-barreled: Keep killing in Iraq while hyping scenarios for withdrawal of U.S. troops.

President Bush has always made a show of rejecting calls for a pullout timetable. Yet the current media buzz about possible withdrawal from Iraq is not without precedent. Some appreciable publicity along similar lines came last fall -- from a journalistic source who has eagerly done some of Karl Rove's dirtiest work.

"Inside the Bush administration policymaking apparatus, there is strong feeling that U.S. troops must leave Iraq next year," Robert Novak wrote in a column that appeared on Sept. 20, 2004. "This determination is not predicated on success in implanting Iraqi democracy and internal stability. Rather, the officials are saying: Ready or not, here we go."

Novak's column did not stop there. With a matter-of-fact tone, it reported: "The military will tell the [U.S. presidential] election winner there are insufficient U.S. forces in Iraq to wage effective war. That leaves three realistic options: Increase overall U.S. military strength to reinforce Iraq, stay with the present strength to continue the war, or get out. Well-placed sources in the administration are confident Bush's decision will be to get out. They believe that is the recommendation of his national security team and would be the recommendation of second-term officials."

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That assessment from "well-placed sources in the administration," trumpeted by Novak's column at the start of the fall campaign, received some media pickup at the time. And Novak didn't let it rest. He followed up with an Oct. 7 piece that asserted: "Nobody from the administration has officially rejected my column." In no uncertain terms, Rove's most useful columnist stood behind his claim that Bush's policymakers believed "U.S. troops must leave Iraq" in 2005.

While the Bush campaign denied Novak's claim, it was helpful to the president. He continued his resolute warrior posturing, while the deniable "leak" falsely signaled flexibility and fresh thinking that could lead to a U.S. exit strategy for the Iraq war.

Still pledging not to "cut and run," the White House can gain from spin that indicates withdrawal is much more likely and more imminent than previously believed. A double-barreled approach – continuing the war effort while suggesting that a pullout is on the horizon – aims to provide a wishful Rorschach blob to commentators and voters.

During the next 15 months, political benefits will beckon for the Bush administration to keep saying things that seem to foreshadow a drastic reduction of the U.S. troop presence in Iraq. Floated withdrawal scenarios will be part of an enormous hoax.

As the war drags on and U.S. public opinion polls show widespread unhappiness about it, Republicans in Congress will be eager for media coverage to become more reassuring before next year's November elections. That's where Operation Withdrawal Scam comes in.

The Bush administration has already boosted or lowered U.S. troop strength in Iraq for military or political purposes. And it has acknowledged plans to make such adjustments again later this year. "Any troop reduction isn't likely to start soon; in fact, overall troop numbers are likely to go up somewhat before they begin to head down," the Wall Street Journal reported on July 28, in connection with a referendum on an Iraqi constitution set for October and national elections scheduled for December.

Spinners in the White House must have felt gratified that the main headline over the Journal's front-page article was notably upbeat: "U.S. Opens Door for Big Pullback in Iraq Next Year."

That "big pullback" is actually quite a long shot. But even such an unlikely occurrence would not necessarily mean less American involvement in the killing of Iraqi people. If American troop numbers drop next summer in Iraq, the subsequent U.S. military role there could be as deadly as ever – or even worse.

Bush administration officials, and their enablers in the news media, say that Iraqis will take up burdens now being shouldered by the occupiers. Such "Iraqization" could change just the style of carnage – like the Vietnamization that occurred in the last several years

of the Vietnam War.

During a much-heralded visit to Guam in July 1969, President Nixon announced that the U.S. government would "furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility for its defense."

Such proclaimed doctrines of replacing American soldiers with natives are real crowd-pleasers in the USA. But such measures may do nothing to reduce the amount of blood on Uncle Sam's hands. Three years after Nixon's mid-1969 pronouncement, the U.S. troop levels in Vietnam had fallen to 69,000. Yet during the three-year withdrawal of nearly half a million American soldiers, the tonnage rate of U.S. bombs falling on Vietnam actually increased.

No matter how many troops it has on the ground in Iraq, the Pentagon will be set up for a major role there. A recent letter in the New York Times shed more light on the Bush administration's intentions than hours of network punditry. "My brother-in-law just returned from a stint in Iraq with the Minnesota Air National Guard," wrote Ronald M. Asher II. "Although he couldn't tell me where in Iraq he was stationed, he did say that the level and type of construction going on at the air base convinced him that the United States military planned on being there for a very long time."

Operation Withdrawal Scam has begun. It will be a long maneuver.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," was just published. Read excerpts from it at www.warmadeeasy.com