

NOVEMBER 22

Getting out of Iraq

Thanksgiving week began with the New York Times noting that "all of Washington is consumed with debate over the direction of the war in Iraq." The debate – long overdue – is a serious blow to the war makers in Washington, but the U.S. war effort will go on for years more unless the antiwar movement gains sufficient momentum to stop it.

A cliché goes that war is too important to be left to the generals. But a more relevant assessment is that peace is too vital to be left to pundits and members of Congress – people who have overwhelmingly dismissed the option of swiftly withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq.

On November 17, a high-profile military booster in Congress suddenly shattered the conventional wisdom that immediate withdrawal is unthinkable. "The American public is way ahead of us," Rep. John Murtha said in a statement concluding with capitalized words that shook the nation's capitalized political elites: "Our military has done everything that has been asked of them, the U.S. cannot accomplish anything further in Iraq militarily. IT IS TIME TO BRING THEM HOME."

Murtha's statement has broken a spell. But the white magic of the USA's militarism remains a massive obstacle to bringing home the U.S. troops who should never have been sent to Iraq in the first place.

There has been no outbreak of conscience in editorial offices or on Capitol Hill. Deadly forms of opportunism are still perennial in the journalistic and political climates that dominate official Washington. The center of opportunistic gravity may have shifted in a matter of days, but the most powerful voices in U.S. media and politics are still heavily weighted toward the view reiterated by President Bush on Sunday: "An immediate withdrawal of our troops from Iraq will only strengthen the terrorists' hand in Iraq and in the broader war on terror."

"Immediate withdrawal" may be a misnomer – Murtha, while calling for it, has urged complete removal of U.S. troops from Iraq within six months. But that's much more forthright than the position taken by Sen. Russell Feingold, who last summer began to

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urge full withdrawal by the end of 2006 – a position that won a lot of praise from progressives at the time even though, in effect, it endorsed a continued U.S. war effort in Iraq for another 16 months. Feingold's position for a pullout deadline now looks pro-war compared to what Murtha is advocating.

On Capitol Hill and among the punditocracy, the failure of the Bush administration to show military progress in Iraq has made the war politically vulnerable. But that line of critique leaves a somewhat clear field for the White House to keep claiming (however implausibly) that U.S. military forces and their Iraqi government allies are turning the corner and can look forward to Iraqization of the war. Today's White House line is akin to the "light at the end of the tunnel" and Vietnamization talk 35 years ago.

If the Pentagon had been able to subdue the Iraqi population, few in Congress or on editorial pages would be denouncing the war. As in so many other respects, this is a way that the domestic U.S. political dynamics of the war on Iraq are similar to what unfolded during the Vietnam War. With the underpinnings of war prerogatives unchallenged, a predictable response is that the war must be fought more effectively.

That's what the great journalist I. F. Stone was driving at when he wrote, a few years into the Vietnam War, in mid-February 1968: "It is time to stand back and look at where we are going. And to take a good look at ourselves. A first observation is that we can easily overestimate our national conscience. A major part of the protest against the war springs simply from the fact that we are losing it. If it were not for the heavy cost, politicians like the Kennedys [Robert and Edward] and organizations like ADA [the liberal Americans for Democratic Action] would still be as complacent about the war as they were a few years ago."

In the United States, while the lies behind the Iraq war become evermore obvious and victory seems increasingly unreachable, much of the opposition to the war has focused on the death and suffering among U.S. soldiers. That emphasis has a sharp political edge at home, but it can also cut another way – defining the war as primarily deplorable because of what it is doing to Americans. One danger is that a process of withdrawing some U.S. troops could be accompanied by even more use of U.S. air power that terrorizes and kills with escalating bombardment (as happened in Vietnam for several years after President Nixon announced his "Guam Doctrine" of Vietnamization in mid-1969). An effective antiwar movement must challenge the jingo-narcissism that defines the war as a problem mainly to the extent that it harms Americans.

Countless pundits and politicians continue to decry the Bush administration's failure to come up with an effective strategy in Iraq. But the war has not gone wrong. It was always wrong. And the basic problem with the current U.S. war effort is that it exists.