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Bush's option to escalate the war in Iraq

The Bush administration may ratchet up the Iraq war.

That might seem unlikely, even farfetched. After all, the president is facing an upsurge of domestic opposition to the war. Under such circumstances, why would he escalate it?

A big ongoing factor is that George W. Bush and his top aides seem to believe in red-white-and-blue violence with a fervor akin to religiosity. For them, the Pentagon's capacity to destroy is some kind of sacrament. And even if more troops aren't readily available for duty in Iraq, huge supplies of aircraft and missiles are available to step up the killing from the air.

Back in the USA, while the growth of antiwar sentiment is apparent, much of the criticism – especially what's spotlighted in news media – is based on distress that American casualties are continuing without any semblance of victory. In effect, many commentators see the problem as a grievous failure to kill enough of the bad guys in Iraq and sufficiently intimidate the rest.

(Bypassing the euphemisms preferred by many liberal pundits, George Will wrote in a Washington Post column on April 7, 2004, that "every door American troops crash through, every civilian bystander shot – there will be many – will make matters worse, for a while. Nevertheless, the first task of the occupation remains the first task of government: to establish a monopoly on violence.")

A lot of what sounds like opposition to the war is more like opposition to losing the war. Consider how Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Trudy Rubin concluded an Aug. 21 piece that disparaged Bush and his war policies. The column included eloquent, heartrending words from the mother of a Marine Corps Reserve member who died in Iraq early this year. And yet, the last quote from her was: "Tell us what it is going to take to win, Mr. Bush." In a tag line, the columnist described it as a question "we all need an answer to."

But some questions are based on assumptions that should be rejected – and "What is it going to take to win?" is one of them. In Iraq, the U.S. occupation force can't "win."

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More importantly, it has no legitimate right to try.

While leveling harsh criticisms at the White House, many analysts fault Bush for the absence of victory on the horizon. A plaintive theme has become familiar: The president deceived us before the invasion and has made a botch of the war since then, so leadership that will turn this war around is now desperately needed and long overdue.

Some on Capitol Hill, like Democrat Joseph Biden and Republican John McCain in the Senate, want more U.S. troops sent to Iraq. Others have different messages. "We should start figuring out how we get out of there," Chuck Hagel said on Aug. 21. He lamented: "By any standard, when you analyze two and a half years in Iraq ... we're not winning." But a tactical departure motivated by alarm that "we're not winning" is likely to be very slow and very bloody.

In the Democratic Party's weekly radio address over the weekend, former senator Max Cleland said that "it's time for a strategy to win in Iraq or a strategy to get out."

Cleland's statement may have been focus-group tested, but it amounts to another permutation of what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the madness of militarism." All the talk about the urgent need for a strategy to win in Iraq amounts to approval for more U.S. leadership in mass slaughter. And the United States government does not need a "strategy" to get out of Iraq any more than a killer needs a strategy to stop killing.

"It is time to stand back and look at where we are going," independent journalist I. F. Stone wrote. "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." Those words appeared in mid-February 1968. American combat troops remained in Vietnam for another five years.

It matters why people are critical of the U.S. war effort in Iraq. If the main objections stem from disappointment that American forces are not winning, then the war makers in Washington retain the possibility of creating the illusion that they may yet find ways to make the war right.

Criticism of the war because it isn't being won leaves the door open for the Bush administration to sell the claim that – with enough resolve and better military tactics – the war can be vindicated. It's time to close that door.

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book

"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

For excerpts and other information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com