

SEPTEMBER 5

Spinning the troop levels in Iraq

September began with 140,000 American troops in Iraq – 13,000 more than in late July. Almost 30 months have passed since Time magazine's mid-April 2004 cover story, "No Easy Options," reported that "foreign policy luminaries from both parties say a precipitous U.S. withdrawal would cripple American credibility, doom reform in the Arab world and turn Iraq into a playground for terrorists and the armies of neighboring states like Iran and Syria."

Back then, according to the USA's largest-circulation newsmagazine, "the most" that the president could hope for was that "some kind of elected Iraqi government will eventually emerge from the wreckage, at which point the U.S. could conceivably reduce the number of its troops significantly. But getting there requires a commitment of at least several more months of American blood and treasure."

As I noted in my book *War Made Easy*, which came off the press 18 months ago, "Hedge words were plentiful: 'the most' that could be hoped for was that 'some kind' of elected Iraqi government would 'eventually emerge,' at which time the United States 'could conceivably' manage to 'reduce' its troop level in Iraq 'significantly,' although even that vague hope necessitated a commitment of 'at least several more months' of Americans killing and dying. But in several more months, predictably, there would still be no end in sight -- just another blank check for more 'blood and treasure,' on the installment plan."

President Bush keeps demanding those blank checks, and Congress keeps cutting them. What Martin Luther King Jr. called "the madness of militarism" provides ample justifications. For Bush, one of them involves couching the choices ahead in military terms – to be best judged by military leaders. This is, in essence, an effort to short-circuit democracy. Bush likes to tell reporters that U.S. troop levels in Iraq hinge on the assessments from top military commanders. This explanation is so familiar that it's hardly newsworthy. But journalists – and the public – should take a hard look at that rhetorical scam.

Civilian control of the military means that the president is accountable to citizens, not generals. But – despite the growing opposition to the Iraq war, as reflected in national opinion polls – the president fervently declares his commitment to the U.S. war effort.

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Rather than directly proclaim that he will ignore public opinion, Bush prefers to shift the discussion from domestic political accountability to ostensible military necessity.

That's where the it's-up-to-the-generals gambit comes in. As soon as the question is re-framed around what multi-star generals say, a closed loop turns into a tightening noose. And a fraud. After all, until the moment of retirement, the generals are in a chain of command -- with the president, as commander in chief, at the top.

The president's claim that key deployment decisions rest in the hands of military chiefs is not only a dodge. It's also manipulative -- shoving public discourse toward the mind-set of assessing military tactics instead of ethical choices. And the claim dangerously encourages the idea that military leaders should have a major say in U.S. foreign-policy decisions. Most of the time, the shift of responsibility is a subtle matter. But sometimes it's quite flagrant. Either way, the news media often play along with the abuse of the democratic process.

More than two years ago, in early May 2004, confirmation emerged that U.S. troop deployments would stay higher and longer in Iraq than previously stated. The New York Times reported the story under the headline "U.S. Commander to Keep 135,000 Troops in Iraq Through 2005."

Such headlines marked the success of efforts to portray the troop-level decisions as military calculations rather than presidential choices. And the spin wasn't only coming from the headline writer. "The commander of American forces in the Middle East, putting on hold the goal of reducing troops in Iraq, plans to keep at least 135,000 soldiers there through 2005, Pentagon and military officials said," the Times lead reported.

Fast forward more than two years, to a story that broke last month. The Associated Press reported on ascending U.S. troop totals in Iraq: "The increase comes as the U.S. Marine Corps is preparing to order thousands of its troops to active duty in the first involuntary recall since the early days of the war." The explanation from the head of the Marines' manpower mobilization, Col. Guy A. Stratton, was telling. "Since this is going to be a long war," he said, "we thought it was judicious and prudent at this time to be able to use a relatively small portion of those Marines to help us augment our units."

But it's not up to military officers to decide whether this is going to be a long war. Under the Constitution, in theory, the president and Congress share that power -- derived from the consent of the governed. We must hold the president and Congress accountable.

*The paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*, was published this summer. For information, go to: www.warmadeeasy.com*