Will Power? Neoconservative Commentary of the Iraq Crisis

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JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, MAR 14 2008

"The neoconservative way . . . is to put an enormous emphasis on the importance of will in confronting and changing the world. America is currently in as unfavorable a position as it is because, more than anything, of a failure of will . . . [I]t can overcome adverse circumstances and prevail again by the mobilization and determined exercise of will." –Owen Harries

In perusing articles and comments dating back from April 2003–July 2007 by the editors and contributing authors of The Weekly Standard a contradictive narrative of unabashed vending of the Iraq War comes into the clear. The idea here is to briefly highlight the kind of thinking that has gotten us to this point, and contributed to the grinding effects witnessed in Iraq.

Shortly after the U.S.—a.k.a. The Coalition of the Willing—invasion of Iraq on April 20, 2003, Bill Kristol and Fred Barnes, editors at The Weekly Standard, appeared on Fox News Sunday. Tony Snow stated in his opening remarks, "Although it's not official yet, Fred—I guess it's going to be made official some time real soon—the war's over." Four years later, he couldn't have been more wrong. But he was not alone. Snow asked panel members to pick their winners. Kristol remarked, "I'm embarrassed by the obvious hokeyness of my pick, but I think the winner is the United States. . . . I think we're on our way to reshaping the Middle East." Meanwhile, the war raged on and casualties began to mount.

While many viewed the Iraq invasion as a done deal, there were those that raised doubts about the necessity, chances of success and justifications for going to war. In fact, Frederick W. Kagan, contributing author to The Weekly Standard, now claims to have criticized Bush's military strategy from the outset, but it's hard to tell considering his more supportive statements.

A year into the war as Bush ran for re-election, vendors of the invasion began looking for quick fixes to the intensifying conflict. For his part, Barnes viewed Fallujah as the thorn in the lions paw. And in September 2004, Barnes put forth the argument that if only Fallujah was "vanquished", national elections could be held and democracy would take root. However, after two attempts at "vanquishing" this town, Iraqi democracy did not take root.

Later in August 2005, as things spiraled further south, Kagan "criticized" Bush's stay-the-course strategy, writing, "despite what you may have read, the military situation in Iraq is positive—far better than it ever was when we were fighting guerillas in Vietnam." Compared to a previous American debacle, Iraq wasn't all that bad, right?

But what stood out in this August 2005 article was his "criticism" of the Iraqi Security Forces. Kagan reported, "perhaps the best news from the region these days is that the Iraqi army is finally producing units able to fight on their own . . . Over the next few months, tens of thousands more Iraqi troops will be able to take the field against the insurgency." Later Kagan would backtrack and de-emphasize the role of the Iraqi forces as a sufficient body in securing Iraq.

To be fair, Kristol doubted the abilities of Iraqi forces, and as American forces were drawn into a protracted conflict, the campaign to sustain America's will became paramount. In an August 2005 article published only four days after Kagan's, Kristol wrote:

"No matter how good a job we are now doing in training Iraqi troops, it is inconceivable that they will be ready to take over the bulk of the counterinsurgency efforts in the very near future. . . . More likely, since Iraqi troops won't be as capable as American ones, the situation will deteriorate."

Hence, withdrawal was not and is not an option for these fellows. Withdrawal represents deficient will. So in June 2006—apparently after some reflection—Kagan switched gears, writing:

"If we return to 'business as usual' and the counterproductive Washington obsession with troop withdrawals, the moment will be lost. . . . Now is the time for a surge in military operations to clear and hold contested areas in Iraq that can offer the prospect of convincing large numbers of Iraqis that the government will win and the insurgents will lose."

In 2007 their wish was granted. Bush is officially down with "the surge" strategy. But don't hold your breathe for progress. As The Weekly Standard shows, progress is in the eye of the beholder. And as Kristol put it in an article this March, "It's too early to say anything more definitive than that there are real signs of progress in Baghdad." But what this means or what metrics there are to evaluate this statement remain to be seen. And there's no telling when this "moment of clarity" might happen—and for good reason too. According to Kagan, "the war is not yet lost, in fact, but timelines are much more likely to hinder our efforts than to help them." In defense of the chances of success of the surge, Kagan has said that the mere name-dropping of the "Baghdad Security Plan" by President Bush in January caused a drop in sectarian violence. Furthermore, "Timelines for withdrawal can only encourage this enemy [Al-Qaeda]. . . ."

Critics of the surge are said to "misunderstand" its objectives of securing Baghdad and its surrounding areas only so as to allow the political process to proceed. However, expanding the Green Zone may not suffice.

Kagan is not alone in his presumption that the establishment of a secured environment is a prerequisite for political establishments to take shape in Iraq. In a sense, Kagan's approach shows hints of Foucault's inversion of Clausewitz's axiom where war is no longer the continuation of politics by other means, but instead politics is born from war and is thus its continuation, not its pacification. The use of force for this purpose, and in such a manner, may appear appropriate, lest we forget Saigon.

However, others interpret trends among Iraqis within Baghdad and the surrounding areas through a more realistic lens. Most recently, Amitai Etzoni has offered his communitarian approach in his latest book, "Security First." The premise is clear: Yes, security is a prerequisite for any functioning society or government to take shape, but the means involve devolving the responsibility of securing Iraq to the provincial level where Iraqis police their own communities: Shi'a, Sunnis, Kurd, thereby ameliorating sectarian loyalties among the Iraqi Security Forces and possibly creating stakeholders against the influx of Al-Qaeda influence.

A "Plan Z" for Iraq may be in store considering a recent White house report covered in the Financial Times (7/13/07) that "presented a mostly negative assessment of the situation there." Yet Kagan is optimistic. As late as June 2007 he wrote, "even with the increased Al-Qaeda violence added in, the level of violence remains stable—a positive change from a situation in which violence appeared to be rising uncontrollably." Well at least we've reached a stable level of attrition. And while the surge promises an increase in casualties, don't stress, for as Kagan concludes, "There is no guarantee that any military strategy will succeed. . . But success remains possible *if we have the will* to try to achieve it" (emphasis mine). What some call a lack of will others call conscience, prudence, and ability to acknowledge the limits of sweeping grand theories devoid of an accounting of reality, better known as unconstrained social engineering.

Kagan is a prominent military historian, indeed. But he seems to push the analogies and lessons of Vietnam as far away as possible. Kagan differentiates between the insurgency and the Iraqi people, but we've learned at great costs

in Vietnam that these divisions aren't exactly material. He believes this plan will establish intelligence generating capability by establishing trust relationships with the local communities, but for years villages frequented by American soldiers were actually used by North Vietnamese to collect intelligence on U.S. movements. And while appearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee last June, Kagan said, "And this is something that concerns me very greatly, because America's future credibility is on the line." Sound familiar?

Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, a Vietnam veteran, was reported saying that "based on his counterinsurgency experience . . . [Kagan's] proposal for the surge was sending exactly the wrong number of troops to Iraq."

While conventional war differs greatly from counter-insurgency, the U.S. military has shown tactical brilliance in fighting its conventional wars and has begun to adapt to low-intensity combat. But Iraq shouldn't be an experimental lab for pundits at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) or The Weekly Standard.

I recently attended an event at AEI where I saw group of young men leaving the building with T-shirts on that read "Surge" across the front in slick lettering. I found out later that this group was off to play their counterparts from the Heritage Foundation in a game of softball on the Mall and "Surge" was the name of their team. How cute. But the reality is that while those kids play trivial ball games, young men and women the same age will brave this war and, hopefully not in vain, lose their lives based on this strategy.

Nonetheless, if we pull out now, America faces many risks, such as leaving a vacuum for either Al-Qaeda or Iran to fill—or witnessing full-scale civil war or genocide and ethnic cleansing. But that is exactly why the "intellectual roots" of how we got here in the first place are so important to remember when looking for directions for the future.

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