



U.S. must prove it's a staying power

(Published in *Chicago Sun Time*, November 12, 2006)

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Colaboraciones n° 1346

November 21, 2006

On the radio a couple of weeks ago, Hugh Hewitt suggested to me the terrorists might try to pull a Spain on the U.S. elections. You'll recall (though evidently many Americans don't) that in 2004 hundreds of commuters were slaughtered in multiple train bombings in Madrid. The Spaniards responded with a huge street demonstration of supposed solidarity with the dead, all teary passivity and signs saying "Basta!" -- "Enough!" By which they meant not "enough!" of these murderers but "enough!" of the government of Prime Minister Aznar, and of Bush and Blair, and troops in Iraq. A couple of days later, they voted in a socialist government, which immediately withdrew Spanish forces from the Middle East. A profitable couple of hours' work for the jihad.

I said to Hugh I didn't think that would happen this time round. The enemy aren't a bunch of simpleton Pushtun yakherds, but relatively sophisticated at least in their understanding of us. We're all infidels, but not all infidels crack the same way. If they'd done a Spain -- blown up a bunch of subway cars in New York or vaporized the Empire State Building -- they'd have re-awoken the primal anger of September 2001. With another mound of corpses piled sky-high, the electorate would have stampeded into the Republican column and demanded the U.S. fly somewhere and bomb someone.

The jihad crowd know that. So instead they employed a craftier strategy. Their view of America is roughly that of the British historian Niall Ferguson -- that the Great Satan is the first superpower with

ADHD. They reasoned that if you could subject Americans to the drip-drip-drip of remorseless water torture in the deserts of Mesopotamia - a couple of deaths here, a market bombing there, cars burning, smoke over the city on the evening news, day after day after day, and ratcheted up a notch or two for the weeks before the election -- you could grind down enough of the electorate and persuade them to vote like Spaniards, without even realizing it. And it worked. You can rationalize what happened on Tuesday in the context of previous sixth-year elections -- 1986, 1958, 1938, yada yada - but that's not how it was seen around the world, either in the chancelleries of Europe, where they're dancing conga lines, or in the caves of the Hindu Kush, where they would also be dancing conga lines if Mullah Omar hadn't made it a beheading offense. And, as if to confirm that Tuesday wasn't merely 1986 or 1938, the president responded to the results by firing the Cabinet officer most closely identified with the prosecution of the war and replacing him with a man associated with James Baker, Brent Scowcroft and the other "stability" fetishists of the unreal realpolitik crowd.

Whether or not Rumsfeld should have been tossed overboard long ago, he certainly shouldn't have been tossed on Wednesday morning. For one thing, it's a startlingly brazen confirmation of the politicization of the war, and a particularly unworthy one: It's difficult to conceive of any more public diminution of a noble cause than to make its

leadership contingent on Lincoln Chafee's Senate seat. The president's firing of Rumsfeld was small and graceless.

Still, we are all Spaniards now. The incoming speaker says Iraq is not a war to be won but a problem to be solved. The incoming defense secretary belongs to a commission charged with doing just that. A nostalgic boomer columnist in the Boston Globe argues that honor requires the United States to "accept defeat," as it did in Vietnam. Didn't work out so swell for the natives, but to hell with them.

What does it mean when the world's hyperpower, responsible for 40 percent of the planet's military spending, decides that it cannot withstand a guerrilla war with historically low casualties against a ragbag of local insurgents and imported terrorists? You can call it "redeployment" or "exit strategy" or "peace with honor" but, by the time it's announced on al-Jazeera, you can pretty much bet that whatever official euphemism was agreed on back in Washington will have been lost in translation. Likewise, when it's announced on "Good Morning Pyongyang" and the Khartoum Network and, come to that, the BBC.

For the rest of the world, the Iraq war isn't about Iraq; it's about America, and American will. I'm told that deep in the bowels of the Pentagon there are strategists wargaming for the big showdown with China circa 2030/2040. Well, it's steady work, I guess. But, as things stand, by the time China's

powerful enough to challenge the United States it won't need to. Meanwhile, the guys who are challenging us right now -- in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea and elsewhere -- are regarded by the American electorate like a reality show we're bored with. Sorry, we don't want to stick around to see if we win; we'd rather vote ourselves off the island.

Two weeks ago, you may remember, I reported on a meeting with the president, in which I'd asked him the following: "You say you need to be on the offense all the time and stay on the offense. Isn't the problem that the American people were solidly behind this when you went in and you toppled the Taliban, when you go in and you topple Saddam. But when it just seems to be a kind of thankless semi-colonial policing defensive operation with no end . . . I mean, where is the offense in this?"

On Tuesday, the national security vote evaporated, and, without it, what's left for the GOP? Congressional Republicans wound up running on the worst of all worlds -- big bloated porked-up entitlements-a-go-go government at home and a fainthearted tentative policing operation abroad. As it happens, my new book argues for the opposite: small lean efficient government at home and muscular assertiveness abroad. It does a superb job, if I do

say so myself, of connecting war and foreign policy with the domestic issues. Of course, it doesn't have to be *that* superb if the GOP's incoherent inversion is the only alternative on offer.

As it is, we're in a very dark place right now. It has been a long time since America unambiguously won a war, and to choose to lose Iraq would be an act of such parochial self-indulgence that the American moment would not endure, and would not deserve to. Europe is becoming semi-Muslim, Third World basket-case states are going nuclear, and, for all that 40 percent of planetary military spending, America can't muster the will to take on pipsqueak enemies. We think we can just call off the game early, and go back home and watch TV.

It doesn't work like that. Whatever it started out as, Iraq is a test of American seriousness. And, if the Great Satan can't win in Vietnam or Iraq, where can it win? That's how China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Venezuela and a whole lot of others look at it. "These Colors Don't Run" is a fine T-shirt slogan, but in reality these colors have spent 40 years running from the jungles of Southeast Asia, the helicopters in the Persian desert, the streets of Mogadishu. ... To add the sands of Mesopotamia to the list will be an act of weakness from which America will never recover.