



## Defeatism Defeated?

Thomas Sowell

Colaboraciones n° 1877

August 14, 2007

If victory in Iraq was oversold at the outset, there are now signs that defeat is likewise being oversold today.

One of the earliest signs of this was that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has said that he could not wait for General David Petraeus' September report on conditions in Iraq but tried to get an immediate Congressional mandate to pull the troops out.

Having waited for years, why could he not wait until September for the report by the general who is actually on the ground in Iraq every day? Why was it necessary for politicians in Washington to declare the troop surge a failure from 8,000 miles away?

The most obvious answer is that Senator Reid feared that the surge would turn out not to be a failure -- and the Democrats had bet every-

thing, including their chances in the 2008 elections, on an American defeat in Iraq.

Senator Reid had to pre-empt defeat before General Petraeus could report progress. The Majority Leader's failure to get the Senate to do that suggests that not enough others were convinced that declaring failure now was the right political strategy.

An optimist might even hope that some of the Senators thought it was wrong for the country.

Another revealing sign is that the solid front of the mainstream media in filtering out any positive news from Iraq and focussing only on American casualties -- in the name of "honoring the troops" -- is now starting to show cracks.

One of the most revealing cracks has appeared in, of all places, the New

York Times, which has throughout the war used its news columns as well as its editorial pages to undermine the war in Iraq and paint the situation as hopeless.

But an op-ed piece in the July 30 New York Times by two scholars at the liberal Brookings Institution -- Michael E. O'Hanlon and Kenneth M. Pollack -- now paints a very different picture, based on their actual investigation on the ground in Iraq after the American troop surge under General Petraeus.

It is not a rosy scenario by any means. There are few rosy scenarios in any war. But O'Hanlon and Pollack report some serious progress.

"Today," they report, "morale is high" among American troops and "civilian fatality rates are down roughly a third since the surge began."

In two cities they visited in northern Iraq "American troop levels in both cities now number only in the hundreds because the Iraqis have stepped up to the plate" in providing their own security.

"Today," they say, "in only a few places did we find American commanders complaining that their Iraqi formations were useless -- something that was the rule, not the exception, on a previous trip to Iraq in late 2005."

In the last six months, O'Hanlon and Pollack report, "Iraqis have begun to turn on the extremists."

In Ramadi, where American Marines "were fighting for every yard" of territory just a few months ago, "last week we strolled down the streets without body armor."

Victory is not inevitable, any more than victory was inevitable when American and British troops landed at Normandy in 1945. General Eisenhower even kept in his pocket a written statement taking full responsibility in the event of failure.

But victory is not even defined the same way in Iraq as it was in World War II. American troops do not need to stay in Iraq until the last vestige of terrorism has been wiped out.

The point when it is safe to begin pulling out is the point when the Iraqi military and police forces are strong enough to continue the fight against the terrorists on their own.

That point depends on how much and how long the current progress continues, not on how much the Democrats or their media allies need an American defeat before the 2008 election.

O'Hanlon and Pollack warn that "the situation in Iraq remains grave" but conclude that "there is enough good happening in Iraq that Congress should plan on sustaining the effort at least into 2008."

But 2008 may have an entirely different significance for politicians than for these Brookings scholars.