

# Senators-in-Chief

Wall Street Journal

January 25, 2007; Page A18

To understand why the Founders put war powers in the hands of the Presidency, look no further than the current spectacle in Congress on Iraq. What we are witnessing is a Federalist Papers illustration of criticism and micromanagement without responsibility.

Consider the resolution pushed through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday by Joe Biden and Chuck Hagel, two men who would love to be President if only they could persuade enough voters to elect them. Both men voted for the Iraq War. But with that war proving to be more difficult than they thought, they now want to put themselves on record as opposing any further attempts to win it.

Their resolution -- which passed 12-9 -- calls for Iraqis to "reach a political settlement" leading to "reconciliation," as if anyone disagrees with that necessity. But then it declares that the way to accomplish this is to wash American hands of the Iraq effort, proposing that U.S. forces retreat to protect the borders and hunt terrorists. The logic here seems to be that if the Americans leave, Iraqis will miraculously conclude that they have must settle their differences. A kind of reverse field of dreams: If we don't come, they will build it.

The irony is that this is not all that far from the "light footprint" strategy that the Bush Administration was following last year and which these same Senators called a failure. It is precisely the inability to provide security in Baghdad that has led to greater sectarian violence, especially among Shiites victimized by Sunni car bombs. The purpose of the new Bush counterinsurgency strategy is to provide more security to the population in the hopes of making a political settlement easier.

But then such analysis probably takes this resolution more seriously than most of the Senators do. If they were serious and had the courage of their convictions, they'd attempt to cut off funds for the Iraq effort. But that would mean they would have to take responsibility for what happens next. By passing "non-binding resolutions," they can assail Mr. Bush and put all of the burden of success or failure on his shoulders.

This is not to say that the resolution won't have harmful consequences, at home and abroad. At home, it further undermines public support for the Iraq effort. Virginia Republican John Warner even cites a lack of public support to justify his separate non-binding resolution of criticism for Mr. Bush's troop "surge." But public pessimism is in part a response to the rhetoric of failure from political leaders like Mr. Warner. The same Senators then wrap their own retreat in the defeatism they helped to promote.

In Iraq, all of this undermines the morale of the military and makes their task that much harder on the ground. When John McCain asked Lieutenant General David Petraeus that precise question during his confirmation hearing Tuesday, the next commander of Coalition operations in Iraq said, "It would not be a beneficial effect, sir."

And when Joe Lieberman asked if such a resolution would give the enemy cause to believe that Americans were divided, he added, "That's correct, sir." Several Senators protested and demanded that the general stay out of domestic politics, but his only offense was telling the truth. Of course the enemy would take comfort from any Senate declaration that Mr. Bush lacks domestic support.

All of this also applies to the many Congressional efforts to set "benchmarks" or otherwise micromanage the battlefield. Hillary Rodham Clinton says she is "cursed with the responsibility gene" that makes her unwilling to cut off funds, but instead she proposes to set a cap on U.S. troops in the theater. So while General Petraeus says he needs more troops to fulfill his mission, General Clinton says he doesn't. Which battlefield commander do you trust?

House Republicans are little better. They blame Mr. Bush and Iraq for their loss of Congress, rather than their own ethics, earmarks and other failures. So looking ahead to 2008 they now want to distance themselves from the war they voted for, albeit also without actually having to vote against it. Thus their political brainstorm is to demand monthly "benchmarks for success" that the Bush Administration and Iraqis will have to meet.

So every 30 days, General Petraeus and his men will have to take their attention away from the Baghdad campaign and instead report to Congress on how well Iraqis and Americans are communicating with one another, among other crucial matters. Minority Leader John Boehner is even asking Speaker Nancy Pelosi to create *another* special Congressional committee to look over the general's shoulder. It's a shame Ulysses S. Grant isn't around to tell them where to put their special committee.

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In addition to being feckless, all of this is unconstitutional. As Commander-in-Chief, the President has the sole Constitutional authority to manage the war effort. Congress has two explicit war powers: It has the power to declare war, which in the case of Iraq it essentially did with its resolution of 2002. It also has the power to appropriate funds.

There is a long and unsettled debate over whether Congress can decide to defund specific military operations once it has created a standing Army. We lean toward those who believe it cannot, but the Founders surely didn't imagine that Congress could start dictating when and where the 101st Airborne could be deployed once a war is under way.

Mr. Bush was conciliatory and respectful in his State of the Union Address Tuesday night, asking Congress to give his new Iraq strategy a chance. In a better world, the Members would do so. But if they insist on seeking political cover by trying to operate as a committee of 535 Commanders-in-Chief, Mr. Bush will have to start reminding Congress who really has the job.

