

Debacle in the desert

by Lionel Van Deerlin

Hollywood could have used George W. Bush. He'd be perfect for those barroom scenes of the Old West - as the cautious card player who never could decide whether to hold 'em or fold 'em.

You didn't have to be anti-Bush to wonder at the president's reaction to this Iraq Study Group. Here's a guy wallowing in what his father once would have called "deep doo-doo." Most of the Iraq war's early supporters have run out on him as things got worse. Voters recently reversed Republican majorities in both the House and Senate. And, at 27 percent, Bush's popular support hovers only four points above Richard Nixon's low mark when he resigned.

Amid this despair, 10 of the nation's most creditable leaders - five Republicans and five Democrats - had come together to toss Bush a lifesaver. It is a comprehensive plan for salvaging what's left of America's stake - indeed, perhaps, of our honor as well - across the Middle East. And this president isn't grateful enough to grab it.

Doesn't he sense the public mood? For any but the most obdurate, our midterm election was decided on the issue of Iraq. Voter judgment came down heavily against investing more life and treasure in this failed offensive. Americans don't demand the impossible - they will understand that a major turn in war policy takes time. Not all the troops can reasonably be headed home tomorrow. As a people, however, we want no further expansion of this desert debacle.

Iraqis seem to feel the same. Reasonably reliable overseas polling suggests they are every bit as eager to see us gone.

Military minds have consistently refused to liken the situation in Iraq to our recollection of the Vietnam venture nearly four decades ago. There are many differences, to be sure. But the obstinacy of two U.S. presidents - Richard Nixon in continuing our presence in southeast Asia long after the jig was up, and now Bush in Iraq - has ominous similarities.

More than half of America's 58,000 deaths in Vietnam occurred after President Johnson left office. With Henry Kissinger at his side, Nixon held on another five years at a cost of more than 30,000 lives. Surely this is not what George W. Bush has in mind. But we are left to guess.

At the behest of a Republican member's motion, Congress created that special commission of "old hands" whose partisan independence seemed beyond challenge. It was co-chaired by the longtime Republican statesman, James Baker, and Indiana's retired Democratic congressman, Lee Hamilton, whose entire public career has been devoted to international relations. Together with eight others - whose caliber is reflected in the presence of the recently retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor - these leaders invested the latter half of 2006 in examining all angles of the Iraq quagmire. They produced a nearly book-length report aimed at pointing a way out.

Who might be blamed for getting us in this deep - Bush, say, or any of his White House team? On this, the report was tactfully silent. But neither did it sugarcoat an alarming truth.

"The situation in Iraq is grave and continues to deteriorate," it declared. "Current U.S. policy is not working ... America's ability to influence events there is diminishing."

Has the president heard too many renditions of "Hail to the Chief?" Does he expect this administration's ultimate reward for failure, a Medal of Freedom? Whatever irked him, Bush's treatment of the distinguished volunteers bordered on rudeness. Simply by thumbing through their recommendations, the president jibed that he had shown greater respect than such reports often command. This one is "important," he allowed - indeed, it might contain ideas that he and the generals will find useful.

Although still bent on "victory," Bush now says he won't tell how until sometime in the new year. Shades of Nixon's secret plan to get us out of Vietnam.

The president's continuing mulishness makes it no easier for the new Congress to do what voters want. Its constitutional power of the purse can be difficult to wield in military matters. If this commander-in-chief insists on keeping troops in Mesopotamia, Congress will feel obliged to sign the check.

Ninety-nine years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched a "Great White Fleet" of 16 capital ships to show the flag around the world. He knew there'd be economy-minded complaints. But even the tight-fisted in Congress couldn't see our Navy and 10,000 men stranded east of Suez. Roosevelt of course got the money to bring 'em back.

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