

Full speed backward in Iraq

by Lionel Van Deerlin

When Cicero speaks, men say, "How well Cicero speaks." When Demosthenes speaks, men say, "Let us go fight Philip!"

That ancient precept is still valid. If he is to win public support for plans to send even a few more brigades into Iraq, President Bush must prove more of a Demosthenes than a Cicero. His goal is to strike new fire in a weary public that wishes to be done with the whole Mesopotamian mess. It was a big order. Did we expect too much of Bush? It's painfully obvious he doesn't have Peggy Noonan still dreaming up presidential utterances. She's the speech-writer who gave the president's father one great line, "Read my lips - no new taxes." And she prepared the remarks for President Reagan's truly moving address on the 40th anniversary of our Normandy landing in World War II.

If you agree that "surge" doesn't quite cut it, even peerless Peggy might have trouble finding the right words this time. Winston Churchill's bell-ringer - "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the streets and in the fields, we shall never surrender" - might seem over-doing it for a war 8,000 miles distant.

A handful of White House loyalists suggested that the president could compare his present options with those facing Abraham Lincoln in Civil War days. As Bush has done, belatedly, Lincoln sacked a succession of military leaders before sending U.S. Grant into a final offensive (a "surge," no less) against Confederate forces in northern Virginia.

But the Lincoln equation hardly fits. Today's president engages in warfare almost entirely of his own making. ("Pre-emptive" action, it's called.) Lincoln, by contrast, led the nation in a struggle that had been forced upon him. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine," reads his first inaugural address, "lies the momentous issue of civil war. ..."

For anyone who is left wondering whence came this idea for the pending surge in Iraq - renewal of a strategy that has disappointed us for many months now - I might have the answer. Perhaps we should pass on Churchill, Lincoln and the other greats. George W. Bush might seem to have found his inspiration in words attributed to French Marshal Ferdinand Foch during World War I. This was while the second Battle of the Marne still raged in July 1918.

"My right has been rolled up," Foch messaged a superior. "My left has been driven back. My center is smashed. The situation is excellent - J'attaque!"

Now there was a commander who knew something about surges. But Foch's famed message also reminds me

of the battered boxer who begs an upbeat corner man to keep an eye on the referee - "because someone's beating the blazes out of me."

Bush, as we know, was barely of draft age during early stages of the fighting in Vietnam. He not only avoided going there, his recollection of the era may be hazy. That conflict, of course, was no more a legally declared war than the one that drags on today. Congress, the only authority constitutionally empowered to make war on behalf of the United States (Article I, Section 8), has not felt a need to declare one since the United States went to war against the Axis nearly 65 years ago. Like both the Korean and Vietnam actions, our Iraq venture came about because a president assumed he knew the situation better than anyone else - and possibly contrived the facts to fit what he didn't know. Which in Bush's case, we recall with sorrow, seems to have been plenty.

His problem of the moment is a declining credibility. No other president has been held in lower esteem since Richard Nixon headed for that getaway helicopter 33 years ago. Bush's reduced standing is almost solely due to events that followed the swift completion of our initial military action against Iraq. In the past, this commander in chief has ceded manpower decisions to his commanders in the field. But now he ignores the advice a majority of them have given him - which is not to perpetuate a strategy marked by failure.

It's widely agreed the reason voters have changed leadership in both houses of Congress was their dissatisfaction with the Iraq stalemate. Republican members who were loyal to Bush in the past may now gulp at the thought of another electoral test just two years away.

Mindful, perhaps, of some pet Scripture as revised for incumbency: How shall a politician profit though he gain the whole world, and lose his own seat?

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