

See you in September?

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

If there is a silver lining in last week's failed effort at immigration reform, it's this: It appears GOP reluctance to disagree with the president has officially ended. This, at least, has welcome implications for U.S. withdrawal from the war in Iraq.

Thirty-seven Republican senators bucked the president on the immigration package, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. Earlier, Indiana's GOP Sen. Richard Lugar, a respected foreign affairs hand, broke with the president on Iraq in a speech on the Senate floor. He called for troop downsizing and more emphasis on diplomacy. Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, chimed in. Another respected foreign affairs expert, Sen. John Warner, R-Va., also has voiced concerns.

Yes, we know '08 re-election campaigns and a president with virtually no coattails are partly spurring the trend. But dare we hope that this is the signal that Congress, long after the public has turned against the war, has gotten the message?

And dare we hope that Democrats will stop getting weak in the knees at the first hint that someone is questioning their patriotism or their support for the troops if they back a timed withdrawal and make creative use of congressional purse strings toward that end? They need only remember that these troops are fighting a war the primary reasons for which have been proved false and which has been executed with alarming incompetence. The conventional wisdom has been that Congress should wait until September, when the president and U.S. commanders in Iraq report on how the troop surge is working. But indications are that they will simply punt again, saying that things aren't working well in Iraq at all, but, you know, with more time they will.

There is no need to wait until September to begin crafting an exit strategy that mitigates the dangers of withdrawal, realizing that "staying the course," no matter how renamed, just fans the fires.

Statements by Lugar et al. could represent a historic opportunity for bipartisan negotiation, perhaps even causing the president to deal. Congress must seize the moment.

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