

Relying on the generals

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

Are we ever to extricate U.S. forces from Iraq? Not until the generals give their OK.

So says President Bush, aka commander in chief. His every utterance on the subject has been to tell us that U.S. policy in the Mideast is not up to him, and certainly no business of Congress. Our brigades will head home only when "the generals on the ground" decide it's time.

From David Petraeus on down, of course, all generals who have managed things up till now were selected and sent to Iraq under the aegis of George W. Bush. We may try not to remember that Bush in the recent past has deigned to sack several of these generals for muddling a mission that he'd marked "accomplished" oh, so long ago.

I find it interesting, too, that most of our wartime presidents found they could not invest total confidence in military thinking. Coming to mind first and foremost would be the frustrations Abraham Lincoln's Civil War generals caused him. That 19th century tragedy might have been significantly shortened, Lincoln felt, had a succession of generals seemed less reluctant to leave the parade grounds.

A special irritant was the man who first headed the Union's Army of the Potomac, youngish Gen. George B. McClellan. After nearly a year's preparation, McClellan headed what was surely the finest fighting force yet seen on the American continent.

"But he had maddeningly refused to take it into battle until he believed it was thoroughly and overwhelmingly prepared - which he never seemed to think it was." Thus writes historian James C. Waugh in "Re-Electing Lincoln."

Uncharitable critics nicknamed McClellan "The Unready." At one point Lincoln wryly prodded him with a note saying "If you aren't willing to use those troops of yours, would you mind lending them to someone else?"

When, after victory at Antietam in September 1862, McClellan permitted Confederate forces to slip away, Lincoln at last fired him. (Honest Abe's reward: a resentful McClellan was nominated by Southern sympathizers (the Democrats) against him for president in 1864 - a campaign that happily failed.) None of Lincoln's generals was able to apply the knockout punch until Ulysses S. Grant answered the president's call nearly two years after Antietam.

As commander in chief during World War II, President Roosevelt involved himself in military strategy, day to day. It had been FDR's decision to elevate Dwight Eisenhower to top command in the European theater - a move that meant certain resentment among a host of commanders with greater seniority. But Ike's selection prompted this assessment by James MacGregor Burns in "Roosevelt: Soldier of Freedom":

"On one great executive responsibility - the recruitment and positioning of talent - Roosevelt deserved credit by any test of administration ... As much by some unerring instinct as by observation and insight, the president made a host of brilliant appointments."

But for sure, FDR felt no need to rely on his generals for quasi-political judgments. Nor did John F. Kennedy, whose disregard of military advice early in the Cold War is credited by some historians for avoidance of a nuclear confrontation.

A crucial decision faced Kennedy during his second year, after Soviet missile launchers were spotted in Cuba. Almost without exception, the Pentagon stalwarts whom the White House summoned for advice urged bombing the launch sites or undertaking an armed invasion of the Caribbean island. Wary that either of these steps could set off World War III, Kennedy instead ordered the interception of Russian shipping headed for Havana. Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev got the message, and the crisis passed.

The rap on Lyndon Johnson was that he tried operating too close to his generals in the Vietnam War - a complaint echoed by the generals themselves. Many were displeased that Johnson, whose military expertise had been gleaned as a ride-along on one or two aerial missions in World War II, often listed the specific North Vietnamese targets he wished our bombers to hit.

Harry Truman may have provided the climactic judgment on generals. Asked by oral biographer Merle Miller (in "Plain Speaking") why he fired Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War, Truman explains:

"Because he wouldn't respect the authority of the president. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a (expletive), although he was. But that's not against the law for generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail...."

Somehow, I don't see this old Battery D artillery captain asking the brass what to do in Iraq.

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