

Opinion

'White Flag' beats false hope

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His foreign policy may resemble fellow Texan Lyndon Johnson's, who was willing to burn distant villages to save them. But George Bush has decided he's not just William McKinley, bearing the white man's burden in Iraq; he's now Woodrow Wilson, ready to make the whole world safe for what America, with all its awesome military power, can't dictate: pluralistic democracy with individual liberty.

How he came to that conclusion of grandeur can be found in an unlikely place; the lyrics of popular singer Dido. In the hauntingly beautiful "White Flag," a losing lover indulges herself in this bittersweet bravado: "I will go down with this ship. I won't put my hands up and surrender. There will be no white flag above my door. I'm in love and always will be."

Failing at love, and leadership, you have a choice. You can enter the world of reality, say you're wrong and take the difficult but sensible course. (Vermont Sen. George Aiken comes to mind with his practical prescription in 1966 for the catastrophe in Southeast Asia: "Declare victory, and withdraw.")

Or you can build a comforting, delusional wall of surreality, higher and higher -- sheltering yourself from all those painful facts.

It's understandable human behavior, when you're in unrequited love or when your policies have been responsible for ending over a thousand, mostly young, American lives and the deaths of thousands of Iraqis, many of them children. You can spend a lifetime in denial, as do many who still believe the only problem with Vietnam was that we didn't play to win.

The grand policy-informing delusion that (mis)-informed policy in the 1960s was that all those little domino nations would topple if Vietnam did. And now, in the creative neoconservative imagination, we have the reverse domino effect: Prop up one democratic domino, and it will push up more.

Otherwise smart people can talk themselves into just about anything when the subject is love or an appealing, but preposterous, theory. And, like Dido's determined lover, they "will go down with this ship." And take thousands more with them.

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