

Editorials/Op-Ed

Take the lead

TODAY'S COLUMNIST

By Terry Michael

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It's hard to get out of a deal with the devil.

That's the congressional Democrats' dilemma, as they continue to treat the Iraq war as a speed bump on their pathway to the perks of restored power, rather than as a moral question to which voters loudly demanded a moral answer two months ago.

Take Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware. "There's not much I can do about it," responded the Democratic "leader" on foreign policy, when asked on one of the Sunday venues for pompous pontificators how he would respond to any attempt by President Bush to escalate the war in Iraq (or "surge," if you prefer it in Orwellian newspeak).

This is a man who sees a future president during his morning look in the mirror. Sadly, the glass reflects an empty suit who embodies the congressional Democrats' decision to reduce action on Iraq to a political calculus appropriate for the highway appropriations bill, rather than as a moral imperative to challenge a policy that has sent thousands of twenty-somethings to their deaths in the desert.

You certainly can do something about it, Senator. It's called leadership. You rise on the Senate floor. You say you were out of your mind to write a blank check for this hideous misprojection of American military power. And then you propose immediate withdrawal, just slow enough to maximize the safety of the 135,000 mostly young men and women you helped put in harm's way by your collusion with this elective war. You do what Republican Sen. Gordon Smith of Oregon had the guts to do last month, stopping just short of accurately labeling this public policy obscenity a criminal enterprise.

I have lived in these 10 surreal square miles for over three decades, usually playing by the rules of decorum required by the political and media classes, first as a young congressional aide, later as a national party committee and presidential campaign operative, and now as an aging educator of journalism students who want to spend their careers interpreting politics.

But, like millions of other Americans, I can no longer contain the primal scream I want to direct at the members of my party who declined to engage a real debate in the run-up to this completely avoidable misjudgment of old men and women, willing to send boys and girls to die for their ideological hallucinations and political cowardice.

Non-existent, and certainly non-threatening WMDs. A secularist paper-tiger dictator, despised by the Islamist lunatics who actually had anything to do with September 11. A tribal, theocratic culture with zero indigenous movement for pluralistic democracy.

All of those things were knowable when congressional Democrats like Mr. Biden had an opportunity to stop this madness before it started. Some of them actually shared the neoconservative pretensions of a new American imperialism. But most just quaked in their permanent campaign boots, fearing being labeled Cold War-style liberal wimps. They averted their eyes and closed their mouths instead of acting like a responsible opposition party four years ago.

So, trying to finesse their way out of their Faustian bargain, Democrats now engage in a transparent antiwar vamp, with limp proposals to implement the September 11 commission report and half-measures opposing escalation. And they receive aid and comfort from misguided and timid editorial pages, like those of The Washington Post and The New York Times, which also colluded with power in the run-up to Iraq instead of challenging it, and which now circumscribe discourse with the narrow frame of how best to muddle on through rather than promote an honest debate about whether to stay or go.

Where are the Gordon Smith's in the Democratic Party? Where are the conviction politicians willing to spend political

capital to lead a citizenry which has decided overwhelmingly that this war is crazy? Where are the institutions of media power with the courage to say the emperor has no cowboy boots, no jeans, no garments at all — just a hideous, stubborn smirk that is literally making this country ill and squandering our reputation around the globe?

I long for a principled politician like my ex-boss Paul Simon, who would have had the courage and the moral authority to take the Senate floor and demand an end to this madness. Instead, the only place I can find truth speaking to power is on a cable TV comedy channel, not in the chambers of what used to be called the greatest deliberative body in the world. Is anybody out there willing to lead?

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