

Time to go: Behind the calls for an exit strategy

NEW YORK, JUNE 21, 2005 – Suddenly, the words “exit strategy” have entered into the popular discourse. 41 Congress members have formed an Out of Iraq caucus. Four, including two Republicans, are proposing a Congressional resolution to set the date. More newspapers and opinion columnists are mouthing the words that were downright unacceptable or even treasonous in last fall’s Presidential election.

Then, the Democrats were out-bushing Bush in their fidelity to the “stay the course until we win” mantra. Anything else was “cutting and running,” in the GOP parlance, and one by one, the “opposition” party cleaved to the center for cover and respectability. MoveOn moved off the war issue, while Howard Dean dropped his anti-war focus to become Party Chairman. All was quiet on the western front as the White House trumpeted success after success, and the press abandoned analysis for hotel-based reporting of incidents. Even the anti-war movement seemed to have slowed its momentum.

And then, the unexpected! An internal secret document was leaked to a British newspaper – owned by Rupert Murdoch, no less – and suddenly, the words Downing Street became known far and near. Activists and the Internet went into overdrive to turn a confirmation of early planning for war into an issue that could be grounds for a Presidential impeachment.

Once again, the US press was asleep at the switch, ignoring it all as “old news” unworthy of coverage. A Google search using the phrase ‘Downing Street Memo’ yielded 154,000 hits, yet only the tiniest fraction were stories in the corporate media. Eric Boehlert reported on Salon, “... newspapers blamed the Associated Press, not mentioning it as an excuse for their own blackout on news of the Downing Street memo for their own lack of coverage.”

Those who rely on mainstream sources for their news didn’t seem to know what the memo said. It was left to David Letterman to inform President Bill Clinton about it, more evidence that comedians know more about what’s happening than many journalists.

But fortunately, not all Americans are relying on Lame-Stream media sources or even the American press: A recent Gallop poll found only 35% of readers found their own newspapers trustworthy. That's one reason that a counter-narrative about Iraq is beginning to take hold.

But even as the controversy about the past came into focus, a new debate is emerging about the future and the media is just catching wind of it. The new forbidden question: Is it time for the US to pull up stakes in Iraq and split? Or is it just a matter of time?

Predictably, Tom Friedman, the NY Times op-ed columnist and sometimes self-styled "Mayor of the Middle East" agonized about how the Pentagon's policies that he had previously supported had failed. But after describing the mess we've made in Iraq, he advocated sending more troops, more "boots on the ground." He sounded just like those liberals advising Lyndon Johnson who kept escalating the number of troops sent to Vietnam.

In Sunday's New York Times, the Baghdad-based John Burns, who also supported the invasion to topple Saddam, is now reporting that US forces are stretched thin and the new Iraqi army is a joke: "Commanders concerned for their careers have not thought it prudent to go further, and to say publicly what many say privately: that with recent American troop levels – 139,000 now – they have been forced to play an infernal board game, constantly shuttling combat units from one war zone to another, leaving insurgent buildups unmet in some places while they deal with more urgent problems elsewhere."

Burns explains that of the 139,000 soldiers in country, only 60,000 are combat troops. He concludes that whatever optimistic news we get of insurgents being slain, the military is reading the tealeaves and wants out. Their code here is "the feeling is growing."

"But whether there are too many American soldiers or too few, a feeling is growing among senior officers in Baghdad and Washington that it is only a matter of time before the Pentagon sets a timetable of its own for withdrawal. These officers point to the effect on American public opinion of the slow disintegration of the 30-nation military coalition that America leads, and to frustration on Capitol Hill with the faltering buildup of Iraqi forces. These officers also cite the recruiting slump and fear the risk is growing that the war, like Vietnam, will do lasting damage to the Army and the Marines."

"I think the drawdown will occur next year, whether the Iraqi security forces are ready or not," a senior Marine officer in Washington said last week. "Look

for covering phrases like ‘We need to start letting the Iraqis stand on their own feet, and that isn’t going to happen until we start drawing down.’ ”

And so, as “the feeling” grows and as demands for withdrawal intensify, watch for those “covering phrases,” the new face of media spin.

And also consider this – a realization widely understood by commentators in the Middle East and echoed daily on pro-insurgent websites like JihadUnspun.com where propaganda from the other side challenges propaganda on ours – that this war is already lost. And ours is the only country that doesn’t know it.

If you thought the Downing Street Memo should have had more coverage, demand reporting on the World Tribunal on Iraq that concludes its year-long, 14-nation series of hearings in the next weeks in Istanbul, with many experts assessing the conflict as a crime. The judgment of guilt is a certainty but, wouldn’t it be great if the American people could get to weigh the evidence?