

Are We Politicians or Citizens?

by Howard Zinn

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As I write this, Congress is debating timetables for withdrawal from Iraq. In response to the Bush Administration's "surge" of troops, and the Republicans' refusal to limit our occupation, the Democrats are behaving with their customary timidity, proposing withdrawal, but only after a year, or eighteen months. And it seems they expect the anti-war movement to support them.

That was suggested in a recent message from MoveOn, which polled its members on the Democrat proposal, saying that progressives in Congress, "like many of us, don't think the bill goes far enough, but see it as the first concrete step to ending the war."

Ironically, and shockingly, the same bill appropriates \$124 billion in more funds to carry the war. It's as if, before the Civil War, abolitionists agreed to postpone the emancipation of the slaves for a year, or two years, or five years, and coupled this with an appropriation of funds to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act.

When a social movement adopts the compromises of legislators, it has forgotten its role, which is to push and challenge the politicians, not to fall in meekly behind them. We who protest the war are not politicians. We are citizens. *Whatever politicians may do, let them first feel the full force of citizens who speak for what is right, not for what is winnable, in a shamefully timorous Congress.*

Timetables for withdrawal are not only morally reprehensible in the case of a brutal occupation (would you give a thug who invaded your house, smashed everything in sight, and terrorized your children a timetable for withdrawal?) but logically nonsensical. If our troops are preventing civil war, helping people, controlling violence, then why withdraw at all? If they are in fact doing the opposite—provoking civil war, hurting people, perpetuating violence—they should withdraw as quickly as ships and planes can carry them home.

It is four years since the United States invaded Iraq with a ferocious bombardment, with "shock and awe." That is enough time to decide if the presence of our troops is making the lives of the Iraqis better or worse. The evidence is overwhelming. Since the invasion, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died, and, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, about two million Iraqis have left the country, and an almost equal number are internal refugees, forced out of their homes, seeking shelter elsewhere in the country.

Yes, Saddam Hussein was a brutal tyrant. But his capture and death have not made the lives of Iraqis better, as the U.S. occupation has created chaos: no clean water, rising rates of hunger, 50 percent unemployment, shortages of food, electricity, and fuel, a rise in child malnutrition and infant deaths. Has the U.S. presence diminished violence? On the contrary, by January 2007 the number of insurgent attacks has increased

dramatically to 180 a day.

The response of the Bush Administration to four years of failure is to send more troops. To add more troops matches the definition of fanaticism: If you find you're going in the wrong direction, redouble your speed. It reminds me of the physician in Europe in the early nineteenth century who decided that bloodletting would cure pneumonia. When that didn't work, he concluded that not enough blood had been let.

The Congressional Democrats' proposal is to give more funds to the war, and to set a timetable that will let the bloodletting go on for another year or more. It is necessary, they say, to compromise, and some anti-war people have been willing to go along. However, **it is one thing to compromise when you are immediately given part of what you are demanding, if that can then be a springboard for getting more in the future.** That is the situation described in the recent movie *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, in which the Irish rebels against British rule are given a compromise solution to have part of Ireland free, as the Irish Free State. In the movie, Irish brother fights against brother over whether to accept this compromise. **But at least the acceptance of that compromise, however short of justice, created the Irish Free State. The withdrawal timetable proposed by the Democrats gets nothing tangible, only a promise, and leaves the fulfillment of that promise in the hands of the Bush Administration.**

There have been similar dilemmas for the labor movement. Indeed, it is a common occurrence that unions, fighting for a new contract, must decide if they will accept an offer that gives them only part of what they have demanded. It's always a difficult decision, but in almost all cases, whether the compromise can be considered a victory or a defeat, the workers have been given something palpable, improving their condition to some degree. If they were offered only a promise of something in the future, while continuing an unbearable situation in the present, it would not be considered a compromise, but a sellout. A union leader who said, "Take this, it's the best we can get" (which is what the MoveOn people are saying about the Democrats' resolution) would be hooted off the platform.

I am reminded of the situation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, when the black delegation from Mississippi asked to be seated, to represent the 40 percent black population of that state. They were offered a "compromise" -- two nonvoting seats. "This is the best we can get," some black leaders said. The Mississippians, led by **Fannie Lou Hamer and Bob Moses, turned it down, and thus held on to their fighting spirit, which later brought them what they had asked for. That mantra -- "the best we can get" -- is a recipe for corruption.**

It is not easy, in the corrupting atmosphere of Washington, D.C., to hold on firmly to the truth, to resist the temptation of capitulation that presents itself as compromise. A few manage to do so. I think of Barbara Lee, the one person in the House of Representatives who, in the hysterical atmosphere of the days following 9/11, voted against the resolution authorizing Bush to invade Afghanistan. Today, **she is one of the few who refuse to fund the Iraq War, insist on a prompt end to the war, reject the dishonesty of a false compromise.**

Except for the rare few, like Barbara Lee, Maxine Waters, Lynn Woolsey, and John Lewis, our representatives are politicians, and will surrender their integrity, claiming to be "realistic."

We are not politicians, but citizens. We have no office to hold on to, only our consciences, which insist on telling the truth. That, history suggests, is the most realistic thing a citizen can do.

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