

Policy Watch: Citizen Bush

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The November 2006 Congressional elections made clear that a majority of the American voters no longer support the war in Iraq. The Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, set forth a bipartisan plan to withdraw U.S. forces through first training and then turning responsibility for security over to the armed forces of Iraq's elected government.

Not only most Democrats, but also an increasing number of Republicans in the House and Senate have signaled that they want to draw down or even withdraw American troops from Iraq.

President George W. Bush, though, not only refuses to withdraw them, but has announced his intention to send even more there.

President Bush has shown he is unwilling to withdraw from Iraq despite declining public and Congressional support for his policies there. Indeed, he and his shrinking band of supporters exude confidence that history will vindicate him for continuing the war effort.

Some of his supporters, though not the president himself, may have concluded that the war is actually un-winnable, but that Bush (and they) will look better if the next -- presumably Democratic -- president pulls out the troops since he or she, and not Bush (or them) will be blamed for any unpleasant consequences that follow.

The fallaciousness of such thinking, though, is readily apparent in looking back at Vietnam: Just because former President Richard Nixon withdrew American forces and Indochina subsequently fell has not made Lyndon Johnson look any better for having gotten America so heavily involved there and not withdrawing U.S. forces himself.

By escalating the war in Iraq despite public and Congressional opposition, history may not vindicate President Bush as he so confidently -- even smugly -- predicts.

Instead, President Bush increasingly resembles Charles Foster Kane in the 1941 classic movie "Citizen Kane," directed by Orson Welles. The film portrays a man who becomes so rich and so powerful that he can accomplish anything -- except get the public to support projects of his that he needs their support on in order for them to succeed.

Especially similar to Bush and the war in Iraq is how Kane is determined to transform Susan (first his mistress, later his second wife) into a world-renowned opera star. There's only one problem: no matter how much he spends to train, coach, and publicize her, she doesn't have it in her to be an opera star. When legitimate theaters won't have her on their stages, he builds his own opera house for her to sing in.

The inevitable result is that the public won't buy tickets to her performances; the only ones who show up are Kane and those on his payroll (and it is evident that the latter do not want to be there). Even Susan herself becomes demoralized, declaring that she can't sing and calling for an end to her public humiliation. But Kane insists that she must continue. She does, but her singing doesn't get any better. Kane's power and influence, though, steadily decline. He ends

up isolated and embittered amidst all his wealth in a world he cannot control.

Not only the American public and Congress, but also the American military leadership (the equivalent of Susan in this analogy) has made clear that it no longer wants to go on with this show.

Like Kane, Bush can insist that the show continue despite this. But also like Kane, Bush's doing so is unlikely to make his policy play any better with the American public, the Iraqi public, or any other audience than it is at present.

Negative consequences may indeed follow after the next administration withdraws American forces from Iraq, as it is highly likely to do. Instead of being vindicated by history, though, Bush is likely to be blamed by it for having worsened these negative consequences due to his insistence first on sending American forces to Iraq and, even more, on keeping them there for too long.

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