

**THE BLOG**

There Is No “Itself” There

By Marty Kaplan

01/10/2007 12:08 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Whenever President Bush explains what “accomplishing our mission in Iraq” actually means — “an Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself and defend itself” — he gets that cat-that-swallowed-the-canary look on his face. Tony Snow, too. They’re so proud of themselves for having come up with that clever answer.

For a while, the Administration dreaded the query like an unfair, trick question: What is victory in Iraq, Mr. President? What does winning really mean? For months, years, they couldn’t adequately answer. But after stammering and rambling through one evasive, ineffective response after another, they finally emerged with this formulation, which they now parrot formulaically, as though it were so incontrovertibly sensible that no follow-up question could survive the gem-like flame of its wisdom.

There’s only one teensy problem with their answer. There is no “itself” there.

Iraq is not a country. It is a collection of warring factions and ethnicities which happen to share a piece of land. It is no more of a country than Yugoslavia was after Tito. It is less of a country than Lebanon, than Afghanistan, than Gaza; it is hardly more of an “itself” than Somalia.

Prime Minister al-Maliki, on whom the Bush plan wants us to pin our hopes, is no Garibaldi. In the years since our invasion, no Iraqi has demonstrated the strength and the vision necessary to stop ethnic cleansing, disarm the militias, end twelve hundred years of religious strife and turn a country arbitrarily carved out of the Ottoman empire by the British and the French into an actual, functioning “itself.”

Saddam Hussein, of course, did that, by wielding ruthless power. The Bush theory is that the same result can be accomplished not by a dictator’s viciousness, but by a democratic ruler benevolently leading a free nation — and that the only thing standing between us and that Rapturous outcome is extending the tours of duty of 20,000 battle-weary American troops for another couple of years.

It is as likely that this escalation will lead to an Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself and defend itself as it is that it will lead to an Iraq that can levitate itself, fellate itself and book itself on a cruise to Bermuda. This is terribly sad, tragic, just as it is tragic that the neocon crackpots who hatched this misbegotten adventure are not now being held

accountable for the fantasy that with a wave of democracy's wand, a millennium and more of seething antagonism would blossom overnight into a civil society, a federal government and a Freedom Domino for the whole Middle East.

Bush and Cheney have not given up on this delusion. No facts on the ground will ever convince them that their mission is pathologically misconceived. Unless they are stopped, they will continue to spend American blood and treasure on it until January 20, 2009; they would rather go to their graves saying they did everything in their power to be the Founding Fathers of a democratic Iraq, than to admit that they made the most colossal what-was-I-thinking? mistake in the history of the United States.

There is no "itself" there in Iraq. There is only broken crockery. And there is no excuse for Congress to remain spellbound by the delusion that thousands of more American lives, and billions of more American dollars, will accomplish a make-or-break difference. That's how a junkie thinks, a doubling-down gambling addict, a fool. The President and the Vice President may inhabit a psychotic folie à deux, but there remains no reason for the rest of us to follow them on the road to this unspeakable hell.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director