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On Winning and Losing Wars **by Sheldon Richman**

The campaign of presumptive Republican presidential nominee John McCain has already gotten tedious. In a campaign appearance the other day, he said in his characteristically sanctimonious way, “I had the courage and the judgment to say I would rather lose a political campaign than lose a war. It seems to me that Obama would rather lose a war in order to win a political campaign.”

We ought to be jaded enough by politics to know that when a candidate says he’d rather lose the campaign than do X, Y, or Z, he’s being anything *but* courageous. Nothing is more calculated to help one win the White House than to say he’d “rather be right than president.” The last guy to say it and apparently mean it was Henry Clay in 1839.

The media focus on McCain’s remark has been on its harshness towards his Democratic opponent, Barack Obama, who is more or less promising to remove most troops from Iraq within 16 months of his inauguration. Candidates for the presidency don’t usually accuse each other of wanting to lose wars. That’s because candidates are usually careful to *sound* like they favor winning. In the American political creed, there is nothing worse than opposing the starting of a war (at least one started by a president who is of your own political party), opposing “victory with honor” once it’s started, or supporting an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of troops. Doing any of these things will most likely get your patriotism questioned. McCain’s faux pas was his bluntness.

The Obama supporters’ reaction, of course, was high dudgeon. Talk-show host Rachel Maddow said McCain was calling Obama a traitor. He does not want to lose the war, she said.

This is politics, and these are political statements. That means they are not intended actually to be scrutinized. They are only for political effect, that is, designed to advance the speaker’s own political interests.

That’s why you’ll see barely any examination of the words “win” and “lose.” But that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Should we win or lose in Iraq? Depends on what we mean.

There’s another word that needs scrutiny: *we*.

When a country goes to war (more precisely, invades and occupies another country), it sounds as though only one entity is acting. But there are really at least two groups involved: the government and the population it dominates. (Of course, the government and population can each be made up of many people with different and conflicting interests.)

So “we” don’t go to war. A small group of policymakers *takes* the rest of us to war.

This consideration sheds light on the issue of winning and losing. It is conceivable that the population taken to war would have been better off if that had not happened and if the military operations were ceased at once. In that case a loss for the policymakers would in fact be a win for the people. And if the people have a better claim to being called the “country” than the policymaking clique do, then a swift end to the war would constitute a win for the “country,” however much it would constitute a defeat for the clique.

All of this applies to the Iraq invasion and occupation. The average American has not been served by the Bush policy. The deaths of thousands of Iraqis and Muslims at the hands of American military forces are not good for the American people. They simply make them potential victims for all those aggrieved people who wish to get even. That is the price of empire. Have we learned nothing from 9/11?

It is probably asking too much of presidential candidates to really talk straight. So the American people will have to vigilantly decipher what they are saying. Appeals to military victory and patriotism are attempts to cloud thinking. A real straight-talking presidential candidate who preferred being right to being president would have this slogan for his Iraq policy:

A loss for the clique is a win for the rest of us!

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