

Defeatism and Democrats

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Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean's recent musings on a Texas radio program about the inevitability of mission failure in Iraq spurred outrage in many quarters of the United States about the message sent by such defeatist language. His comments also stirred deep-seated anxieties among Democrats about the party's perceived relationship with military failures.

While it is true Mr. Dean's comments were set in a larger context and were subsequently distorted by Republicans thankful for the opportunity to divert attention from the Bush administration's record on Iraq, Mr. Dean and others in the party still have resurrected worries about the steadfastness of Democrats when the going gets tough. As such, Mr. Dean has done the party he represents and the nation he aspired to lead a grave disservice at a most inopportune moment.

These worries were not always prevalent in public attitudes about the Democratic Party in times of conflict. Indeed, some of the most unswerving perseverance in modern military history can be found in the examples of Franklin Roosevelt's leadership in 1942 when nothing was going well in the fight against the Axis powers or President Truman's 1950 countering the North Korean communist advance after taking heavy losses. Yet the wrenching public divide over the Vietnam war rendered a deep if at times hidden rift within the Democratic Party -- a rift that frequently flares open during periods of military tension.

The deeply disturbing realities of Iraq have stirred a kind of political post-traumatic stress syndrome whereby some Democrats, including Mr. Dean, start searching for the exits when developments on the ground do not proceed to our liking.

Democrats are on solid ground when they critique many aspects of the prosecution of the Iraq war by the Bush administration. And for those who opposed the war from the outset, they have every moral, political and strategic right to continue to say we should not be there.

But when advocates of retreat (or redeployment, or whatever politically correct term for withdrawal is currently in vogue) argue defeat is inevitable, Democrats are sure to raise profound concerns among the American people.

The Bush administration has tried to use the ongoing combat in Iraq as a shield against justifiable criticism of its conduct of the war. Yet, administration officials are right to point out that talk of defeat has a profoundly corrosive effect on our soldiers, sailors and Marines serving in harm's way. The question of what to do next in Iraq has created an enormous schism in the Democratic Party and there are now many variants from Joe

Lieberman's "stay the course" to a number of proposals for hastening the U.S. troop drawdown. But Mr. Dean crossed a line by suggesting defeat is all but inevitable.

Defeat in Iraq is hardly inevitable. Despite many ongoing difficulties and risks, the recent elections provide political hope, the training of Iraqi security forces accelerates, and the economy shows at least some progress.

In addition to Mr. Dean's comments being unfounded on their strategic merits, they were also unwise politically. The former Vermont governor has inadvertently reminded many Americans why they are reluctant to trust some Democrats when the going gets tough. While reams of public polls suggest a majority prefer a Democratic approach to most aspects of public policy from managing the economy to caring for society's weakest members, there is that glaring matter of national security. And Republicans maintain a distinct advantage on this score even after the fiasco of the Iraq war.

Many mainstream Democrats are beginning to appreciate that the only way to get their mojo back is by hanging tough on military and national security matters. This does not mean reflexively supporting the president on defense issues or always advocating the use of force. It does mean not putting up the white flag in the middle of one of the most consequential phases in Iraq since the miserable insurgency began.

Mr. Dean would do well to remember Democrats already have their work cut out in rebuilding credibility on national security issues, and this already difficult task is not assisted by defeatist talk from one of the party's purported leaders.

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