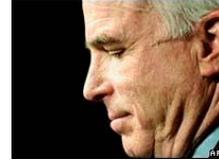


Report from Washington DC: John McCain Address at American Enterprise Institute, 11/9/2005

By Jens F. Laurson



In a speech at the American Enterprise Institute on Wednesday, November 9th, John McCain presented his vision on “Winning the War in Iraq”. Speaking before a crowd many of which were active supporters of the Iraq war, he was certain to receive a warm reception at least on this topic – but McCain could probably have charmed his way through a Brookings event just the same. He acknowledged in turn the difficulties with the process of the War in Iraq and repeatedly criticized the Administration for trying to present things in a benign light when the efforts so far made in Iraq – although perhaps more successful than generally reported by the media – have evidently been lacking in the desired results. This honesty toward the American people, but also the Iraqis and the U.S.’ allies, was the centerpiece of McCain’s strategy for winning the “Home Front”. Drawing an analogy with Vietnam, he chastised politicians of making the same mistakes again. Back then, he said, they would always assuage the people with undue optimism and then the light at the end of the tunnel “turned out to be a train.” McCain did not shy away from mentioning the human sacrifice so far incurred and likely to be demanded of American mothers for some years to come – and urged the American people to support a war, the successful resolution of which he not only deemed possible (although not with the current Administration’s policies or the military tactics currently employed) but far more important than in the Vietnam conflict. (Which could have been assumed, though, given that the U.S. lost in Vietnam)

In his effort to turn the very debate from “just *when* to run away” from Iraq into how to win the war, he pointed out that, for all the difficulties, Iraq was on the right way. For his argument – that cutting losses and running would be far more devastating than staying the course (albeit with improved tactics) – he had to work off the premise that the war was winnable in the first place. Despite a 4:1 approval of the Iraqi constitution and the claim that numbers did not adequately indicate the direction into which Iraq was heading, this may have been the weak-spot of his argument – although one his audience was not wont to question. Terrorists, representing ‘despair’ in a struggle with ‘hope’ have not achieved their goals, McCain claimed. They have not stopped the democratization process, not gotten a Veto in internal affairs, not achieved a (full) civil war, not lowered oil export levels (though hindered an increase thereof) – all because Iraqi’s still had hope. A withdrawal from the current Iraq, even one in stages as proposed by Senator Kerry – a proposal that McCain said would lead to on the road to disaster and a slipper slope of removing ever more troops – would only lead to full scale civil war and greater bloodshed, McCain claimed. But more hard-nosed reasons also spoke against withdrawal: U.S. Security and its cousin, (in)stability in the entire Gulf region were at stake. Leaving Iraq now would ensure that it became a failed state and therefore a real source of trouble.

But rather than just claim that the war had to be won, McCain laid out his strategy of how the war could in fact be won. Instead of seasonal sweeps of insurgent-ridden areas he proposed a diligent “Clear & Hold” strategy where a region would be secured and held

by security forces so that reconstruction and civil society could bloom within these areas until they were able to protect themselves – even if that were to take months or even years. McCain did not fail to criticize the Pentagon’s removal of experienced Generals from Iraq. He encouraged heterogeneous, multi-ethnic military units – not because they were particularly efficient (they are not) but because their symbolic character would strengthen the Iraqi national self-image as it did in Afghanistan. He advocated ‘stopping’ Syria from offering its soil to terrorists and reiterated the importance of winning the homefront where he again attacked the undue optimism and sugarcoating of the situation by the administration – stopping just short of accusing them of lying and distorting.

Calling the WMD-conclusions about Saddam Hussain’s regime “false but honest”, he acknowledged that Iraq “is for us [the U.S.] to win or lose!” Warning of too much reliance on allies he said that wherever possible, allies should be convinced (by positive means) to support the cause in Iraq – not by military means (which would be most unlikely to be forthcoming, anyway) but through administrative help. On the issue of Iraqi unity he insisted that Iraq must stay one and that there was indeed a feeling of nationalism among Iraqis who, he said, felt Iraqi first, only then Kurdish, Sunni or Shiite.

Supporting his Anti-Torture Legislation in the Senate he called it one of the most important elements in winning the war. In a humorous answer to the question whether he thought that the State Department felt similarly, he said that he did not know – but that the DOS *was* strangely silent on the issue. Making sure that the audience knew that it was neither his business nor desire to call for Secretary Rumsfeld’s removal, he made no secret out of the fact that he did indeed not have confidence in Rumsfeld and his ability to turn the effort in Iraq around. The Anti-Torture Legislation was necessary for several reasons he laid out. Torture verifiably does not work. It is tremendously damaging to the U.S. and its image in the world. It is immoral. Furthermore it would have ramifications in a future war for the U.S. and its soldiers. McCain went on to call for more soldiers in Iraq and demanded that the Guards and Reserve forces no longer be so overused – but that instead the Army and Marines would be increased to reflect the reality on the ground.

Speaking for more than 80 minutes – well over half an hour beyond the scheduled time so he could take and answer most questions, Senator McCain finally concluded his appearance, telling the crowd in the overflowing AEI Wohlstetter Conference Center that he had to “go back and do the Lord’s work in the City of Satan”.

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