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Where Are The Democrats?

When it comes to Iraq, the opposition party is afraid to oppose.

[Terry Michael](#) | March 2007 [Print Edition](#)

It's hard to get out of a deal with the devil. That's the congressional Democrats' dilemma as they continue to treat the Iraq war as a speed bump on their pathway to the perks of restored power.

Take Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware. Asked on one of the Sunday venues for pompous pontificators how he would respond to any attempt by President Bush to escalate the war in Iraq (to "surge," if you prefer it in Newspeak), the Democratic "leader" on foreign policy responded, "There's not much I can do about it."

This is a man who sees a future president during his morning look in the mirror. Sadly, the glass reflects an empty suit who embodies the congressional Democrats' decision to reduce action on Iraq to a political calculus appropriate for the highway appropriations bill, not a moral imperative to challenge a policy that has sent thousands of twenty-somethings to their deaths in the desert.

You certainly can do something about it, Senator. It's called leadership. You rise on the Senate floor. You say you were out of your mind to write a blank check for this hideous abuse of American military power. And then you propose immediate withdrawal, just slow enough to maximize the safety of the 135,000 young men and women you helped put in harm's way by your collusion with this elective war. You do what Republican Sen. Gordon Smith of Oregon had the guts to do last month, stopping just short of accurately labeling this public policy obscenity a criminal enterprise.

I have lived in the 10 surreal square miles of D.C. for more than three decades, usually playing by the rules of decorum dictated by the political and media classes, first as a young congressional aide, later as a national party committee and presidential campaign operative, and now as an aging educator of journalism

students who want to spend their careers interpreting politics.

But like millions of other Americans, I can no longer contain the primal scream I want to direct at the members of my party who declined to engage in a real debate in the run-up to this completely avoidable misjudgment of old men and women. Nonexistent, and certainly nonthreatening, WMDs. A secularist paper-tiger dictator, despised by the Islamist lunatics behind the September 11 attacks. A tribal culture with zero indigenous movement for pluralistic democracy.

All of those things were knowable when congressional Democrats such as Biden had an opportunity to stop this madness before it started. Some of them actually shared the neoconservative pretensions of a new American imperialism. But most just quaked in their permanent campaign boots, fearing being labeled Cold War-style liberal wimps. They averted their eyes and closed their mouths instead of acting like a responsible opposition party.

Now, trying to finesse their way out of their Faustian bargain, Democrats engage in a transparent anti-war vamp, with limp proposals to implement the 9/11 commission report and half-measures opposing escalation. And they receive aid and comfort from misguided and timid editorial pages, like those of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, which also colluded with power in the run-up to the Iraq war instead of challenging it and which now circumscribe discourse with the narrow frame of how best to muddle through rather than promote an honest debate about whether to stay or go.

Where are the Gordon Smiths in the Democratic Party? Where are the politicians of conviction? Where are the institutions of media power with the courage to say the emperor has no cowboy boots, no jeans, no garments at all—just a hideous, stubborn smirk that is making this country ill and squandering our reputation around the globe?

The only place I can find truth speaking to power is on a cable TV comedy channel, not in the chambers of what used to be called the greatest deliberative body in the world. Is anybody out there willing to lead?

Terry Michael, former press secretary for the Democratic National Committee, directs the Washington Center for Politics & Journalism and blogs at terrymichael.net. A version of this article also appeared in the Washington Times.

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