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Who Will Say 'No More'?

By Gary Hart

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"Waist deep in the Big Muddy and the big fool said to push on," warned an anti-Vietnam war song those many years ago. The McGovern presidential campaign, in those days, which I know something about, is widely viewed as a cause for the decline of the Democratic Party, a gateway through which a new conservative era entered.

Like the cat that jumped on a hot stove and thereafter wouldn't jump on any stove, hot or cold, today's Democratic leaders didn't want to make that mistake again. Many supported the Iraq war resolution and -- as the Big Muddy is rising yet again -- now find themselves tongue-tied or trying to trump a war president by calling for deployment of more troops. Thus does good money follow bad and bad politics get even worse.

History will deal with George W. Bush and the neoconservatives who misled a mighty nation into a flawed war that is draining the finest military in the world, diverting Guard and reserve forces that should be on the front line of homeland defense, shredding international alliances that prevailed in two world wars and the Cold War, accumulating staggering deficits, misdirecting revenue from education to rebuilding Iraqi buildings we've blown up, and weakening America's national security.

But what will history say about an opposition party that stands silent while all this goes on? My generation of Democrats jumped on the hot stove of Vietnam and now, with its members in positions of responsibility, it is afraid of jumping on any political stove. In their leaders, the American people look for strength, determination and self-confidence, but they also look for courage, wisdom, judgment and, in times of moral crisis, the willingness to say: "I was wrong."

To stay silent during such a crisis, and particularly to harbor the thought that the administration's misfortune is the Democrats' fortune, is cowardly. In 2008 I want a leader who is willing now

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to say: "I made a mistake, and for my mistake I am going to Iraq and accompanying the next planeload of flag-draped coffins back to Dover Air Force Base. And I am going to ask forgiveness for my mistake from every parent who will talk to me."

Further, this leader should say: "I am now going to give a series of speeches across the country documenting how the administration did not tell the American people the truth, why this war is making our country more vulnerable and less secure, how we can drive a wedge between Iraqi insurgents and outside jihadists and leave Iraq for the Iraqis to govern, how we can repair the damage done to our military, what we and our allies can do to dry up the jihadists' swamp, and what dramatic steps we must take to become energy-secure and prevent Gulf Wars III, IV and so on."

At stake is not just the leadership of the Democratic Party and the nation but our nation's honor, our nobility and our principles. Franklin D. Roosevelt established a national community based on social justice. Harry Truman created international networks that repaired the damage of World War II and defeated communism. John F. Kennedy recaptured the ideal of the republic and the sense of civic duty. To expect to enter this pantheon, the next Democratic leader must now undertake all three tasks.

But this cannot be done while the water is rising in the Big Muddy of the Middle East. No Democrat, especially one now silent, should expect election by default. The public trust must be earned, and speaking clearly, candidly and forcefully now about the mess in Iraq is the place to begin.

The real defeatists today are not those protesting the war. The real defeatists are those in power and their silent supporters in the opposition party who are reduced to repeating "Stay the course" even when the course, whatever it now is, is light years away from the one originally undertaken. The truth is we're way off course. We've stumbled into a hornet's nest. We've weakened ourselves at home and in the world. We are less secure today than before this war began.

Who now has the courage to say this?

The writer is a former Democratic senator from Colorado.

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