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Jim Webb's Barnburner

By Mike Whitney

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We are now as a nation held hostage to the predictable—and predicted—disarray that has followed the invasion of Iraq." Senator Jim Webb (D-VA) "A star is born" Mark Shields, political pundit on Jim Lehrer News Hour assessing Jim Webb's Democratic response to the S.O.T.U.

Nothing scares the "powers that be" more than a straight-shooting populist who can rally people against government policy. And, yet, that's exactly what happened on Tuesday night in the Democratic response to the State of the Union Speech (S.O.T.U.). In just 9 minutes, freshman Senator, Jim Webb took a sledgehammer to Bush's policy in Iraq and left 45 million Americans cheering for more. It was a tour de force the likes of which we haven't seen since Harold Pinter gave his Noble acceptance speech 2 years ago.

Webb was brilliant. He not only erased 40 minutes of Bush-blather and demagoguery; he lifted the country out of the squalor of pessimism by pointing the way out of Iraq and towards greater economic justice.

Hoorah! Isn't that what leadership is all about?

It's ironic that it took a former Reagan Republican to lower the boom on Bush; especially when the burgeoning crop of Democratic presidential hopefuls are stumbling over themselves to appear more antiwar than the other.

Webb made them all look wishy-washy in comparison. He now joins that select group of Democratic vertebrates who speak from the heart and have the cahones to back it up. (Murtha)

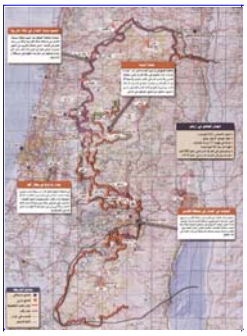
The senator's speech was lucid and statesmanlike invoking numerous examples from American history to blast the administration's fanatical strategy in Iraq. His no-nonsense style and sense of conviction only added to an already powerful statement.

Oh yeah; and he's a decorated combat veteran, too. He served his time in Vietnam while Bush was sucking

Earth, a planet hungry for peace

Apartheid Wall

The Israeli Land-Grab Apartheid Wall built inside the Palestinian territories, here separating Abu Dis from occupied East Jerusalem. (IPC, 7/4/04).



The Israeli apartheid (security) wall around Palestinian population centers in the West Bank, like a Python. (Alquds,10/25/03).

down truckloads of Lone Star beer in the Texas National Guard “champagne unit”. (When he wasn’t A.W.O.L.)

When Webb held up the photo of his father (who served in WW2) and spoke of his son (now serving in Iraq) he cut through all the rhetorical-horseshit about “democracy” and “liberation” and gave us a clear picture of who really makes the sacrifices in war. Too bad, he didn’t have photos of the 650,000 Iraqis who have died in Bush’s Folly; that would have given his audience a chance to appreciate the magnitude of this tragic blunder.

Webb also wrote his own speech. It wasn’t a compilation of poll-tested thoughts and feelings extracted from a White House focus group and flashed on a teleprompter for a fake President. It was the heartfelt expression of a guy who still believes in the American dream.

“I still keep my father’s picture to remind me of the sacrifices that my mother and others had to make, over and over again, as my father gladly served his country. I was proud to follow in his footsteps, serving as a Marine in Vietnam. My brother did as well, serving as a helicopter pilot. My son has joined in the tradition, now serving as an infantry Marine in Iraq.

Like so many other Americans, today and throughout our history, we serve and have served, not for political reasons, but because we love our country. On the political issues—those matters of war and peace, and in some cases of life and death—we trusted the judgment of our national leaders. We hoped they would be right, that they would measure with accuracy the value of our lives against the enormity of the national interest that might call upon us to go into harm’s way. We owe them our loyalty, as Americans, and we gave it. But they owed us sound judgment, clear thinking, concern for our welfare, a guarantee that the threat to our country was equal to the price we might be called upon to pay in defending it.”

Webb speaks with the quiet rage of someone who has performed his duty and been betrayed. But then, we were all betrayed. There were no weapons, no terrorist connections, and no threat to national security. It was all fiction.

Webb’s son and the others like him are now stuck in Iraq fighting an invisible and lethal enemy in a brutal colonial occupation. That’s not what they bargained for. They were grossly misled by their commander in chief and, now, the anger is beginning to come to the surface.

Phased Withdrawal

“The majority of the nation no longer supports the way this war is being fought; nor does the majority of the military,” Webb said. “We need an immediate shift toward strong, regionally-based diplomacy, a policy that takes our soldiers off the streets of Iraq’s cities, and a formula that will in short order allow our combat forces to leave Iraq.”

This isn’t the plan for “immediate withdrawal” that many of us now seek, but it is a step in the right direction. The coalition of antiwar Americans is now reaching deep into the conservative base. It’s the death knell for Bush’s plans for “perpetual war”.

The War at Home---the class war

Webb was equally persuasive in his condemnation of Bush’s economic policies. Deregulation, privatization, and outsourcing are savaging the middle class and creating divisions that threaten our democracy.

“Wages and salaries for workers are at all-time lows as a percentage of national wealth, even though the productivity of the American workers is the highest in the world. Medical costs have skyrocketed. College tuition rates are off the charts. Our manufacturing base is being dismantled and sent overseas. Good American jobs are being sent along with them….In short, the middle class of this country, our historic backbone for a strong society in the future, is losing its place at the table. Our workers know this, through painful experience. Our white collar professionals are beginning to understand it, as their jobs are starting to disappear also. And, they expect, rightly, that in this age of globalization, their government has a duty to insist that their concerns be dealt with fairly in the international marketplace.”

Webb’s speech revives the spirit of American populism and frames the war in Iraq within the larger context of class struggle. He cited former presidents who served the public interest by using their power to fight big business:

“Regarding the economic imbalance in this country, I am reminded of the situation President Theodore Roosevelt faced in the early days of the 20th Century. America was then as it is now drifting apart along class lines. The so-called robber barons were unapologetically raking in a huge percentage of the national wealth. The dispossessed workers at the bottom were threatening revolt. Roosevelt spoke strongly against these divisions. He told his fellow Republicans that they must set themselves ‘as resolutely against improper corporate influence on the one hand as against demagogy and mob rule on the other.’ And he did something about it.”

“We must ensure that the benefits of our economy are properly shared among all Americans,” Webb added.

“Redistribution” from a Reagan Republican?!? What Democrat would be bold enough to say that?

The Democrats are nearly as guilty of ignoring class warfare and the unjust distribution of wealth as the Republicans. It takes a catastrophe like Katrina to rouse politicians from their slumber and see how the poor are brushed aside like garbage.

Webb’s speech hit the jackpot on a number of levels. It was another withering blow to Bush’s crumbling credibility and it put the “widening income gap” back on the political docket. Both of these are positive developments.

If Webb’s speech is any indication, the Democrats are off to a good start. With ex-Marines Webb and Murtha leading the charge, we might be able to end this monstrous bloodbath after all.

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