

Bigger Army? Pols march to wrong beat

By ANDREW J. BACEVICH

Is the U. S. Army too small?

The Democrats vying to succeed President Bush think so. Presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Barack Obama all promise, if elected, to expand our land forces. Clinton has declared it "past time to increase the end-strength of the Army and Marines." Edwards calls for a "substantial increase." Obama offers hard numbers: His program specifies the addition of 92,000 soldiers.

Leading Republicans concur. John McCain has long advocated a bigger Army. Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney are now chiming in. Giuliani wants to expand the Army with an additional 10 combat brigades. Romney says that "at least 100,000" more troops are needed.

This bipartisan consensus - which even includes Bush, who recently unveiled his own five-year plan to enlarge the Army and Marine Corps - illustrates the inability or refusal of the political class to grasp the true nature of our post Sept. 11 foreign - policy crisis. Any politician who thinks that the chief lesson to be drawn from the last five years is that we need more Americans toting rifles and carrying rucksacks has learned nothing.

This enthusiasm for putting more Americans in uniform (and for increasing overall military spending) reflects the persistence of a second consensus to which leading Democrats and Republicans alike stubbornly subscribe.



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This second consensus consists of two elements. According to the first element, the only way to win the so-called global war on terrorism, thereby precluding another Sept. 11, is to "fix" whatever ails the Islamic World. According to the second element, the United States possesses the wherewithal to effect just such a transformation. In essence, by employing American power, beginning with military power, to ameliorate the ills afflicting Islam, we will ensure our own safety.

This is sheer twaddle, as events in Iraq have manifestly shown. Yet even today, among mainstream Republicans and Democrats, expectations persist that the United States can somehow reform and therefore pacify the Muslim world.

In fact, the great lesson of Iraq (further affirmed in Afghanistan) is that the umma - the Arabic name for the entire Muslim community - is all but impervious to change imposed from the outside.

The worldwide Muslim community is all but impervious to change imposed from the outside.

If anything, our ham-handed efforts to inculcate freedom and democracy, even if well-intentioned, have played into the hands of violent Islamic radicals. Given the mess in which we currently find

ourselves, increasing the number of men and women under arms makes about as much sense as drinking bourbon to treat depression. In the short term, the antidote might make you feel better, but at a cost of masking the underlying problem and allowing it to fester.

The underlying problem is that the basic orientation of U.S. policy since Sept. 11 has been flat wrong. Bush's conception of waging an open-ended global "war" to eliminate terrorism has failed, disastrously and irredeemably. Simply trying harder - no matter how many more soldiers we recruit and no matter how many more Muslim countries we invade and "liberate" - will not reverse that failure. More meddling will evoke more hatred.

The challenge confronting those aspiring to the presidency, therefore, is to devise an alternative to Bush's failed strategy. To pass muster, any such strategy will have to recognize the limits of American power, military and otherwise. It must

acknowledge that because the United States cannot change Islam, we have no alternative but to coexist with it.

Yet coexistence should not imply appeasement or passivity. Any plausible strategy will prescribe concrete and sustainable policies designed to contain the virulent strain of radicalism currently flourishing in parts of the Islamic world. The alternative to transformation is not surrender but quarantine.

Overtime, of course, Islam will become something other than what it is today. But as with our own post-Christian West, that evolution will be determined primarily by forces within. Our interest lies in nudging that evolution along a path that alleviates rather than perpetuates conflict between Islam and the West. In that regard, the requirement is not for a bigger Army but for fresh ideas, informed by modesty and a sense of realism.