

You Can't Win a Snipe Hunt (2007)

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I learned many useful things as a Boy Scout. One was that you can't win a snipe hunt.

That is the lesson I think about more and more as the Iraq war drags on and we await General Petraeus's report on progress in the war. The President still talks about victory, and other supporters of the war talk about "winning." But we cannot win, since what we set out to do is impossible.

I never saw a real snipe hunt, where the new boys are sent out late at night to catch snipe, which are said to be flightless birds that roll clumsily down the hill and can be caught in pillowcases or gunnysacks. But I did meet kids who were sent to borrow such things as "left-handed smoke-shifters," which were as easy to find as snipe. Somehow I thought that sending Tenderfeet on such hunts was not really in the Scout spirit, since lying to new scouts seemed to exemplify neither the trustworthiness nor the friendliness that are points of the Scout Law. So I would tell those seeking a smoke-shifter that such things did not exist. They usually looked at me quizzically and went off to the next campsite to find someone nice enough to share the equipment with them, instead of an oddball who claimed that they were on a quest no one could accomplish.

As a nation, we have been acting like those boys. We were told that there were Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. We went to find them. We got up in the middle of the night, got out our gunnysacks, and waited for the snipe to come rolling downhill. Our gunnysacks are empty because the Weapons of Mass Destruction, like the snipe and the smoke-shifters, were never there. That means we have to learn what every boy on a snipe

hunt learns: that you have been lied to and that the boy who told you the lie, whatever uniform he's wearing, is not your friend or a person you should ever trust again.

If in the course of the snipe hunt you have set the woods on fire, you may be obligated to put the fire out. But you haven't "won" just because you have cleaned up the mess you have made. You still don't have a snipe. The closest you can come to winning is to quit the snipe hunt early—as so many of the members of the "coalition of the willing" have done—or to refuse to be bullied into going on it in the first place, as our French and Canadian allies did. General Petraeus may perhaps report that the forest fire is under control; he cannot say we have any chance of winning.

In a little more than a hundred years, Americans have been persuaded to support three large-scale wars because they were told things that just weren't true. The Spaniards did not sink the battleship *Maine*. The North Vietnamese did not fire on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf. There were no Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. All those stories were circulated to drum up support for wars whose real justifications would not have convinced our people that they were worth the price. But as a result of those fictions thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of the people we set out to "rescue" died in the "Philippine Insurrection," the Vietnam War, and the War in Iraq. In the future, Americans should assume that all calls for foreign wars are snipe hunts unless squadrons of Zeros have inflicted heavy damage to our fleet or columns of tanks are rumbling over the territory of our allies.

And from now on, all American children should be taught to recite the following as part of their regular history lessons: "Remember the *Maine*. Remember the Tonkin Gulf. Remember WMD's. And remember that you can't win a snipe hunt."

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