

TEACHING THE WAYS OF 'THE FORCE'

BY CARL M. CANNON

John Murtha had a problem.

It was the spring of 1990. President George H.W. Bush and his military brass were requesting a big increase in the defense budget. As chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Murtha, an ex-marine and pro-military Democrat, wanted to give it to them. But as he examined the rationale provided by the Pentagon, Murtha concluded he needed more information.

So Murtha called David M. Abshire, co-founder of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Washington player who—then, as now—knew as much as anyone about the politics and policy of U.S. defense planning.

"I will have to defend [this] appropriation bill on the floor, but the outline given me by the Pentagon is still one to fight the Warsaw Pact," Murtha complained to Abshire. "I need your help with the threat analysis. Could you bring a CSIS expert team in each area of the globe before my subcommittee, informally?"

Over the next few months, Abshire did just that. By July, in discussing the Middle East, one of the CSIS analysts, Shireen Hunter, told Murtha's panel that Iraq might invade Kuwait.

"This is it!" Murtha replied, reaching for his calendar. "Dr. Abshire, reinforce your team and come back, say August 3—to give a longer briefing on Iraq."

Abshire kept that appointment, even though Saddam Hussein's military had rolled into Kuwait a day before.

Murtha supported U.S. efforts to oust Iraq from Kuwait and has always backed the military, which is why Republicans met his recent call for an American withdrawal from Iraq with such hostility—and why Democrats met it with such glee. But Abshire, who does not believe that America should pull out of Iraq, heard something else. He detected the echoes of Vietnam, a war he believes was not lost in the combat zone where Americans like young John Murtha were fighting, but in the crucial theater of battle called American public opinion.

If Murtha, however, is playing the rash Luke Skywalker, Abshire is Master Yoda, the wise Jedi teacher who fought in the earlier wars of The Republic.

Abshire graduated from West Point in 1951 and was sent to Korea, where he earned decorations as a combat platoon leader, a company commander, and a division intelligence officer. After coming home, Abshire earned a doctorate in history at Georgetown. In 1962, along with Navy Adm. Arleigh Burke, Abshire founded CSIS and now heads the Center for the Study of the Presidency. Abshire was an assistant secretary of State for congressional relations in the Nixon administration, and an ambassador to NATO in the Reagan administration. In 1987, Abshire was tapped to help quell the damage from the

Iran-Contra scandal, an episode about which he has written a recent book, his fifth.

A few political observers have suggested that Abshire's book could prove an opportune resource for the White House's current occupant, if only he would heed its lessons. Abshire had the same thought. Two months ago, he sent a private memo to Vice President Cheney.

Abshire would not show *National Journal* that memo, but its contents can be gleaned from a speech Abshire gave on December 1 in his hometown of Chattanooga, Tenn. In that talk, Abshire says flatly that "stay the course" is not a strategy at all, and that President Bush needs to flesh out an approach that will lead to victory in Iraq. It is time, Abshire said, for Bush "to pivot and move in a heroic way" in rallying Americans behind the war in Iraq and the war on Islamicist terror, and he outlined several steps the president could take toward that end. All of them entail Bush receiving a greater range of outside advice—and being willing to heed that counsel, even if it means altering his approach.

- Create a powerful, nonpartisan White House foreign-intelligence advisory board with direct access to the president, including assurances that dissenting views will be heard.

- Open true two-way communication with Congress on national security—especially with members who've been to Iraq—so that the president has the benefit of "fresh eyes on the target."

- Initiate a "mini-Manhattan-type Project" to develop ways of detecting smuggled nuclear materials and devices.

- Demand that Congress fund a dramatic and extensive expansion in benefits for the National Guard, the Coast Guard, and the Army Reserves. This sweeping undertaking would deal with several interrelated problems at once. They range from not having any home Guard in place in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit, to the wrecked family finances of reservists who have served long hitches in Iraq where they've drawn Army pay instead of their private-sector wages.

"What the president is doing with these speeches on Iraq is extremely important—he simply must remind people of what we are doing in Iraq and why losing there would be disastrous," Abshire told *National Journal*. "But rhetoric is not enough. When it comes to shoring up the Guard and the Reserves, it's going to cost more money. Murtha spends a lot of time with wounded soldiers at Walter Reed. Those troops, and the condition of the Guard and Reserves—that's what set off Murtha."

John Murtha has a problem. He's not alone. ■

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