

Good Times Home

No Means No

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Women who take self-defense classes are always coached to fight back. Whether it's a potential date rape situation with someone you know, or an unexpected assault from a stranger, any time an aggressive male presumes to put himself in a position of power, your best defense is to refuse to lie down and take it. Your life may depend on it.

It's a prosecutable assault case as long as it can be established that you were dragged into the encounter against your will. So the first order of business in self-defense is a strong, clear "No." If that "no" is not respected, the aggressor can expect a fight.

Back in the Reagan administration, the "N" word was invoked as a weapon with which a younger generation of warriors was supposed to fight back in the so-called war on drugs. If anyone tried to bully them into a toke, a tab, a hit, or any other unwanted agenda, kids were advised to "just say no."

Sure, it's only a word, but it may be one of the most powerful in the language, any language. Its power is as eternal as the parent-child relationship; chances are the first word any crawling infant actually understands is "no." Ditto dogs, whether in obedience class or in the act of being chased off the furniture. (Even cats understand the word "no," they just assume it doesn't apply to them.) The first thing any pet, any child, any date, or any peer must understand if a relationship is to succeed is this: No means no.

Here in the age of irony, we like to sauce up our simple declarative remarks with a little extra oomph. Nowadays, a parent or colleague or partner attempting to put an emphatic kibosh on some particularly crazy scheme may resort to sarcasm. "What part of 'no' don't you understand?" we deadpan.

For three years now, America has been held hostage to an aggressive male agenda. She was coy about it at first, wasn't sure if she ought to speak up. His argument seemed so compelling, and she wanted to be a good sport. Besides, these are scary times. Maybe it didn't seem like such a bad idea to let the big, powerful cowboy have his way with her. If she gave in to him, at least he'd be around to keep her safe from even scarier aggressors with foreign accents and impenetrable motivations. Like many a deceived lover before her, she chose to believe his snaky lies and agreed to stay his course; better the devil you know, as the rationale goes.

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But familiarity breeds contempt, and we've gotten to know this devil all too well. Last November, America finally woke up from her, long slumbering acquiescence and decided, however belatedly, to stand up for herself. While he was off somewhere beating his war drum, she snuck out the back way to the ballot box and sent a strong, clear message: No. No more lies. No more fruitless aggression. No more dying for no good reason. A newly reorganized House and Senate has put the lonesome cowboy on notice: America won't lie down and take it any more. She wants out of Iraq.

And how does the great Decider respond? By proposing to feed 21,500 more troops into the gaping maw of Iraq, an additional 21,500 potential lives to throw away for the sake of his sagging, flaccid pride. In yet another unnerving echo of the Vietnam era, Bush, like Nixon before him, doesn't want to be the one to lose a war. After three years of unalloyed chaos in Iraq, he wants another chance to make his policies work.

Oh, c'mon, Baby, just give me one more chance. What woman hasn't heard that one before? And even if you take the louse back, how often does the situation ever really improve?

Here's a news flash, for those of you who came in late: there's no such thing as winning a war. One government or ideology may be temporarily victorious over another (at least until the next war). But for those who actually fight the damn thing, it's a no-win situation. It's devastating for the losers, who mostly end up dead, and thus unable to appreciate the glorious benefits of democratic freedom. And it's devastating for the winners, many of whom also die, or are otherwise physically, mentally and/or emotionally maimed for life. As Jean Paul Sartre once wrote, once you hear the details of victory, it's hard to distinguish it from a defeat.

And yet, we're warned of dire consequences should the U.S. "fail" in Iraq—like bloody civil war, or the possibility that Iraq will become Command Central for international terrorist activity. Oh, wait, that's going on in Iraq right now, thanks in no small part to the presence of U.S. troops. Does that mean we've already failed? Mr. Bring-it-on can wave around his pop-gun all he likes, but the real fighting men and women deserve to come home now. America wants to get on with her life.

Three years, more than 3,000 American (and countless hundreds of thousands of Iraqi) lives, and unconscionable billions of dollars are more than enough. Why give him a chance to do even more damage? What part of "no" doesn't he understand?

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