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Iowa's presidential-caucus season is off to a slow start, so Governor Terry Branstad let slip a blazing 100-decibel hog call when he announced that many Republican voters in his state were still up for grabs. "It's a wide-open race," he said. His real message to the GOP hopefuls, however, could not be clearer: Iowa is open for business, and you had better get here, starting right now.

To which I say, candidates, grab your wallets. Iowa's caucuses have been important in presidential politics since 1976, when the unknown Jimmy Carter used his second-place victory – "undecided" came in first – to jump-start his drive to the White House. Four years later, a little-known Republican named George Bush Sr practically moved to Iowa for two years and won an early upset over Ronald Reagan.

It's easy to imagine that the Iowa caucuses are a grifter's delight. Slick-talking candidates from back East or down South invade Iowa like latter-day Harold Hills, with carpetbags full of brassy political promises instead of band instruments. They shake a few hands, devour a few corn dogs and lift a pile of votes from Iowa's honest and simple folk.

Candidates may go to Iowa thinking they are the sharpies, but in truth they are the marks. The canny Iowans lure in all sorts of hopefuls, who find themselves spending millions on television ads, motels, office space, rental cars and catering. With 99 counties, Iowa has a lot to organize, and of course, every county must have a local coordinator, field staff and a humble Main Street storefront.

This heartland hustle works so well that Hillary Clinton dumped some \$29 million into Iowa in 2008 and still lost. Barack Obama, Mitt Romney and the other candidates spent millions more. This is such a good angle that the Iowa GOP even created a lucrative second mini-caucus, called the Ames Straw Poll. In August, months before the caucuses themselves, 10,000 to 20,000 voters cram into a field house at Iowa State University to vote for their chosen candidate. This naturally requires a \$30 ticket, all checks payable to the Republican Party of Iowa. Ames is sheer genius: it's an essentially phony contest that forces the candidates to start earlier, visit more often, book more hotel rooms and put more friendly Iowans on the payroll to organize the vast logistics of busing all those would-be voters to Ames. (In the early days, the straw poll was run poorly. In 1995, I voted several times, chitchatting with consultants from rival campaigns as we washed the "I voted" stamps off our hands in the men's room. They say the rules are much tougher now, which I believe.)

Iowans stoutly defend their caucus system as a grass-roots rarity, which it is. With amazing hospitality, excellent public schools, the nation's fairest redistricting and – as should now be quite clear – a very practical view on fiscal matters, Iowans have plenty to teach a candidate. That said, the actual connection between winning the caucuses and winning the nomination is quite spotty. The elder Bush, Bob Dole and Mike Huckabee all won the caucuses at various times and then lost the nomination.

That's chiefly because the caucuses weed out about half of Iowa's GOP-primary voters. Since voting in the caucuses involves slogging through a cold winter night in January or February to stand around in a high school gym or somebody's living room for a few hours, it attracts the intense and increasingly ideological voters who like their political meat served raw. And since the caucus vote is splintered among several candidates, as few as 40,000 votes are often enough to win. Some candidates are getting wise to this racket. Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman have been keeping their distance from the state. Only former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty has committed his calendar and checkbook, seeing a first- or second-place finish in Iowa as his best way to break through into the big time. But to thrive, Caucus Inc. needs many players, which explains Branstad's hog call.

All Iowa comers should remember this: Iowa isn't the only early state with a lucrative franchise to protect. Shortly after the Iowa winner is declared, the jungle drums of prickly New Hampshire start beating out their own home-state message: "Screw Iowa. We decide."

**Key themes and comments
about the article:**

*GOP stands for "Grand Old Party",
in reference to the Republicans*

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President Bush Jr’s speech Wednesday night had to strike a perfect pitch. He had to defend the war that will define his legacy while admitting to enough error to regain credibility with the public. Consequently, commentators are still trying to figure out whether he conceded mistakes, showed regret or intends to change course at all. In this respect, Mr. Bush’s speech follows in that great American oratorical tradition: the presidential mea culpa.

Figuring out how to acknowledge failure without seeming like a failure is a time-honored occupational hazard of politics. But not until the 20th century did presidents govern mainly by mobilizing public opinion through rhetoric, and only with the rise of broadcasting did the celebrated “televised speech to the nation” become a staple of White House damage control. While these confessions may work in the short term, they rarely work long-term magic. That typically requires a new course of action.

Ronald Reagan gave a relatively tepid mea culpa in addressing a Senate commission’s findings that he hadn’t leveled with the public in the Iran-contra scandal. “A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages,” he said in March 1987. “My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.” But President Reagan won praise for taking responsibility, and, more critically, for committing to an overhaul of White House personnel and policy. He renounced the covert wrongdoings of his former aides and eventually struck a landmark arms-control treaty with the Soviet Union.

Another buck-stops-here performance was John F. Kennedy’s press conference after the Bay of Pigs, when American-backed Cuban rebels were routed in a bid to overthrow Fidel Castro. “Victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan,” President Kennedy said, concluding, “I am the responsible officer of the government.” His popularity soared. Over time, what sealed his reputation was his later calls for a re-evaluation of the cold war and for a nuclear test-ban treaty. Other presidents have failed to capitalize on their dramatic speeches. In March 1968, Lyndon Johnson called a halt to bombing in Vietnam and ended his re-election bid, while vowing to redouble his efforts to achieve peace. But the goodwill faded as he kept the Democratic presidential nominee tethered to a failed strategy until it was too late. Similarly, President Bush Sr gained little benefit from his 1992 apology for breaking his no-new-taxes pledge. “I did it, and I regret it” he told a newspaper, as he tried to fend off a challenge in the Republican primaries. But Mr. Bush’s many reversals – vowing no new taxes, raising them, then recanting – only made him seem fickle and opportunistic, alienating both left and right. Most tellingly, the master of the confession, Richard Nixon, tried in April 1973 to stanch the hemorrhaging from the Watergate scandal by unloading three of his top aides and declaring a fresh start. “I was determined that we should get to the bottom of the matter, and that the truth should be fully brought out – no matter who was involved,” he said. That turned out to be a lie, and he lost his credibility all over again.

Sometimes, if the public supports a president, he doesn’t need to change course at all. When President Bill Clinton acknowledged in August 1998 that he misrepresented his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, Washington pundits said his speech was a disaster. But it turned out that most of the public considered Mr. Clinton’s initial show of remorse sufficient and thought the impeachment drive should end. His administration remained popular, while displeasure with the news media rose. Of course, some presidents simply acted as if no apology were needed. Dwight Eisenhower refused to admit he’d erred after his administration lied about a U-2 spy plane shot down over the Soviet Union. He withstood sharp criticism and the unraveling of a planned Soviet summit.

Throughout his presidency, Mr. Bush has been faulted for being too stubborn and unwilling to change, admit error or say he’s sorry. But owning up to blunders is not always a ticket to forgiveness. After President Clinton apologized on his 1998 trip to Africa for the American role in the slave trade and for his administration’s passivity during the Rwandan genocide, his habit of contrition became a running joke.

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What can you do with a Congress that does nothing? A commission suggested last week that the best solution to the problem of an overreaching wartime Executive and a supine wartime Congress is "more meaningful consultation between the president and Congress on matters of war." In a 72-page proposal to overhaul the 1973 War Powers Act, they essentially demanded that Congress grow a spine. As this is a surgical rather than a legislative proposition, it is unclear whether the proposed reforms can really get the job done.

Congress passed the War Powers Act after Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon went to war in Vietnam without a congressional declaration. The law gave the president 90 days after introducing troops into hostilities before congressional approval was needed. In the intervening years, the law has had all the legal force of a doily. It has never been formally invoked, presidents of both parties have declared it unconstitutional and Congress has refused to force the issue. Successive White Houses have filled that breach with an ever more expansive reading of Article II, Section 2. Many read it to mean that Congress is a constitutional bathmat.

Technically the Congress is not a bathmat. Indeed, the constitutional grant of war powers to Congress is generous, including the power "to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations," "raise and support Armies," "provide for the common Defense" and even, um, "declare War." But the committee began their constitutional analysis from the premise that "the Constitution provides both the President and Congress with explicit grants of War Powers" and went on to divvy them up from there. Consultation between the branches is the solution, not Executive deference to Congress.

The proposed changes are better than nothing. New fixes would require the president to consult with Congress before deploying troops into "significant armed conflict" (ie, lasting more than a week) and require consultation in covert operations or emergency circumstances after three days. The commission recommends a new Committee. But the commission all but disregards the Framers' concern that Congress be given the ultimate authority over matters of war and peace. As James Madison wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "The constitution supposes, what the History of all Governments demonstrates, that the Executive is the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it. It has accordingly with studied care vested the question of war in the Legislature."

But Congress is always too deferential, too credulous and too timid to check a strong president in wartime, and only ever speaks out after the war has become unpopular. Congress will always offer up a tiny little authorization to use force, and stand by as that authorization swallows up several countries, many years and thousands of dead soldiers. Our war-powers problems lie not in the failure of checks and balances, but in the fact that Congress is invariably comfortable opposing wars only in hindsight.

This leads to the second mistaken premise behind the War Powers Commission: its belief that the core failure of the War Powers Act lay in its poorly drafted, ambiguous language. But consider the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act – the 1978 wiretapping law that made it a felony to engage "in electronic surveillance under color of law except as authorized by statute." That language is perfectly clear and yet last week the Senate voted to clarify it again. Now the same surveillance that was illegal when the president ordered the government to spy on Americans six years ago will be illegal in the future. The problem wasn't a vague law – it was an overreaching Executive.

There is a reason the Framers were so worried about granting the president the power to initiate wars—even teensy little unanticipated emergency wars—and granted that power to the people who would fight them instead. Abraham Lincoln put it this way: "Kings had always been involving and impoverishing their people in wars, pretending generally, if not always, that the good of the people was the object. This, our Convention understood to be the most oppressive of all Kingly oppressions." The Constitution assumed a congressional branch capable of pushing back against a king. The War Powers Commission has downgraded that to a congressional branch able to "consult meaningfully" with a king. The Framers would say that's a step in the wrong direction.

**Key themes and comments
about the article:**

Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution provides that "The president shall be Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States."

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